Hyacinth House

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Hyacinth House

by bluesyturtle

Summary

It all starts with an injury Will sustains while sleepwalking.

Notes

Why were you born? Just to play with me?/To freak out or to be beautiful, my dear?

See the end of the work for more notes

- Translation into Polski available: Hiacyntowy Dom by erraticmuse
- Translation into 中文-普通话 國語 available: Hyacinth House by KerryAne

Who Scared You

At some point he starts walking through the trees. Twigs catch in his hair, and tar-black mud sinks in between his toes. He realizes when he looks down that he left his shoes somewhere by the house, all his clothes, too. He presses on. The cool slick earth twists beneath his bare feet, and brambles scratch lightly at his sides as he walks through them; all soft caresses and warm sighs that envelop him.

He doesn't know where he's going until he's standing at a break in the trees not big enough to be a clearing. Thick underbrush and small oak trees hole him in on all sides. He stands and waits, watching the lightning bugs that weave through the spaces in between the tree boughs. They're courting each other, he thinks. It's a good night for that.

Moonlight filters in through the leaves like a speckled spotlight. Everything is quiet except for the hum of insects and the rustling of leaves in the breeze. There is a slow shuffle of a beast moving in the dark.

Will is not surprised when the stag steps into the impossibly small enclosure. They stand and stare at each other, and eternity ticks by. Will reaches out, unprecedented in his other dreams, and touches the creature's nose. It is as frightening and surreal as it is majestic. It blinks thoughtfully at Will.

For a moment they just stand together, watching and mingling as one solid being where Will's hand presses flat against its head. A thrumming pulse stirs up in Will's fingers, or maybe it comes from the black animal before him.

The trees gradually begin to fall away. Will barely notices until the colorless void surrounds them. The stag's eyes burn dark maroon like coals in a fireplace, and it tilts its head back to release an earth-shattering bellow. The noise crashes over Will, but he remains standing. The link connecting them keeps him safe from harm. It feels like a life preserver keeping him afloat in the blackness.

Bone white antlers twist up higher and higher into the abysmal vacuum where the sky and all its constellations should be. For a moment, there is only the sound of the stag's roar. When it fades like the final notes of a beautiful song, Will feels himself crying. The feeling trembling within him is a kind of religious wonder, a marrow-deep joy.

He can feel that this is for him, and not just because he is the only one bearing witness to it. He watches as the stag's stalagmite antlers gore the blank expanse above them. They create new planetary bodies of light that somehow seem more familiar and make more sense to Will.

The stag abandons the project it's made from the sky to bow deeply. The death instruments atop its head descend overhead like a slow-falling guillotine. Will looks up into the grotesque daggers that were once calcium and collagen. He is prepared, willing, to have his eyes scrambled into his brain, but the blow never comes.

The antlers are reasonably sized again, and they are brushing against his cheek. The touch is questing and curious. It's a test. Will smiles and reaches up, understanding, in his skin and in his muscles, what he must do. He breaks a tine in each one of his hands, and the animal shrieks, but not in pain. The cry is exultant. Before Will can change his mind, the antlers are sprouting from the palms of his hands into the not-sky again.

They are different from the stag's, but they wind up and up, together; the stag's are ivory and the ones in Will’s hands are shale. They blacken and harden into lead at the tips where they lock into place with the stag's. Streaks of red shoot through Will's every time he struggles against the pull.

Will's hands burn around the tines. He watches as his flesh melts to reveal the mucous tendons and tight ribbons of nerves. He tries to let go, but it's too late. They've wrapped around his wrists and arms and have started to lift him off his feet. The stag watches silently, snuffling through its shiny nose. Will feels lost, but then it noses at his ankle.

He looks down into those maroon eyes. They practically glow red with livid intensity.

"See."

He wakes to the sound of his dogs barking and finds himself standing in the middle of the yard still fully dressed, clothes drenched through with cold sweat. The sun has begun to rise over the treetops. There's a knife in his hand. He's holding it by the blade, dripping blood everywhere.

When he drops it, his hand is bathed in the red. The two deep cuts in the middle look like a sacrifice.

He walks slowly back into the house, tracking dirt everywhere and leaving an inconstant trail of blood in his wake. He rinses his hand under cold water that eventually becomes warm and lays his head down on the cool counter top.

His hand is pruned when he pulls it back. He squirms out of his wet clothes until he's standing naked and shivering in the kitchen, clothes piled in soaked heaps at his pale feet.

The cuts are bleeding again by the time he makes it to the bathroom to clean them out and secure his hand in a clean white length of cotton. Hours after he's washed it clean, his hand still feels bloody. He wraps it too thickly in a cotton bandage and changes it once after every lecture. He swears it doesn't get any better as the day progresses.

He sort of expects his hand to be healed or worse, for the wounds to be completely gone, every time he checks. But they are always there, red and wet and hideous yet still drawing Will's eyes.

The marred flesh of his palm is strangely lovely. He studies the sharp points of red in the middle and the hard ridges of burgundy scabbing around the edges. When he holds his hand under the light, it looks almost like road kill, like it's not even a part of himself or part of any human being.

That close-up, anything looks like meat. The thought doesn't even bother him.

He gets home forty-five minutes before he has to leave for his appointment with Hannibal. He uses the time to feed the dogs and throw his clothes from the night before in the wash. He stands and stares for thirty minutes at the closed lid of the washing machine. When the rumbling stops, he throws the wet clothes into the dryer and goes into the bathroom to change the bandage on his hand.

When it's time to go, Will locks the front door behind him. Driving poses something of a problem as he has to hold his hand away from the steering wheel in order to grip it with his fingers. The angle doesn't really allow for his thumb to have any purchase on the wheel, and he nearly crashes twice on the freeway. The young woman in the old Cutlass nearly drives off the road. An older man, accompanied by an even younger woman, in a brand new Maserati flips him off and speeds away.

Hannibal's office is pristine and spacious, and it makes his hand feel grubby where he's hiding it in his pocket. He is on time, though. He usually is if he doesn't miss the appointment altogether for whatever reason, but he's never been injured upon arrival before. For some reason, Will dreads hearing what Hannibal will have to say about it.

Even trying to keep it a secret tucked away in his jacket, Will gets found out when Hannibal offers to hang it up for him. There's something about Hannibal's polite tone of voice that Will can't refuse without feeling terribly rude.

He lets Hannibal pluck it from his shoulders, realizing, belatedly, that he could have taken it off himself and handed it to him. He doesn't think about it too much. Hannibal's hand barely grazed his shirt, and as close as they're standing to each other, he's come to enjoy being near Hannibal in a physical capacity.

A steady, gorgeous serenity pulsates out of Hannibal all the time like a heartbeat set to the rhythm and tone of a bass drum. It placates Will, even as his fear stabs through the calm. It worsens when Hannibal moves away to sit down.

The tension in the air feels potent enough to suffocate, but Hannibal looks blatantly unaffected. Will is about to run out the door when Hannibal points out his hand with all the casual grace of a stranger asking for the time. He doesn't even ask; just mentions the horrible job he did dressing it. He doesn't say *horrible,* of course, but it is.

He wanted it to look as presentable and tidy as possible. Hannibal probably thought he was a slob already, keeping as many dogs as he did, but Will was determined to look at least a little bit collected in the presence of his psychiatrist, despite the knife wounds in the center of his hand.

The bandage itself is an eye-sore, bulky and bleach white. Will had to strain to close his fingers around it. Every time he did that, the cuts re-opened. Since the drive over, he'd felt the sharp sting of skin tearing at least half a dozen times. Beneath all the cotton, it was probably bleeding again. He hoped the excess layers would keep Hannibal from noticing.

"It was an accident." Will picks at the gauzy cotton wrapped tightly around the back of his hand. The ends fray at his touch. He'd dressed flesh wounds before, but he hadn't taken time, this time, to do it well. He was in a hurry to change the dressing before he left for his hour with Hannibal. He'd decided at the last minute that an ugly but clean bandage would go over better than the neat but filthy one he'd worn home from work.

"Not involving one of the dogs, I hope."

"Oh, no." It takes Will a moment to realize he's asking if one of the dogs bit him. "No, they don't bite." He shakes his head, almost offended at the suggestion that any one of his dogs would turn on him.

"A kitchen accident then." Hannibal offers, leaning back in his armchair and crossing his legs. Will stares at the pleated suit pants, counts the pinstripes he can see before looking down at his own chair. They've definitely been moved. When they first started seeing each other, they were at least several feet apart. Now two at the most separate them.

He could nudge Hannibal's foot with his own, and it wouldn't take more than a minute stretch. He wouldn't even have to move to the edge of his seat to do it. It would look like an accident.

"Something like that." Will answers distractedly, remembering the question.

"I could move the chairs back if you would like." Will looks up, startled. There is a funny little glint in Hannibal's eyes. "I thought we were making progress. The chairs are a physical marker of that progress."

Progress toward sexual harassment charges, you mean. Will blinks.

"I like the chairs where they are." He catches the very bottom of Hannibal's smile before he looks away to the wall behind Hannibal.

"In that case, I will keep them where they are."

The nervous energy in Will's body shocks him into movement, and he stands. He crosses the room, only vaguely aware of how much the action resembles a retreat. Hannibal stands, too, all lithe limbs and an expensively tailored ensemble. Will averts his eyes enough that he can't be tempted into looking. Hannibal would know if he were only pretending to keep his gaze elsewhere.

"How was your dinner party?" He asks absently, running just the tips of his fingers along the stag's back. The statuette has haunted Will the past few months since he first noticed it. That was right before Hannibal smelled him.

Weird chef's quirk, I guess. The smooth, cool feel of it is nothing like the sharp bristles hinted at him in his dreams.

"It went well. I enjoy having people for dinner." Hannibal stands and paces over to Will. "We were in good company, though it would have been much improved had you joined us."

Will lets a small smile flicker across his lips at that. He thought Hannibal had seemed earnest in his suggestion that Will should stay. He's happy to see that he really was. He's actually *happy.* He doesn't want to linger on why that might be either, but he suspects it's because Hannibal is a friend. They're friends.

They haven't said as much, naturally. It's not the kind of conversation people normally have, but then, he was nowhere near normal. And while Hannibal functioned and fit into a crowd (for those not watching carefully), he was something more than normal, too. Not abnormal, per se. Just not normal. Better than normal.

"I would have made everyone uncomfortable." He becomes slightly bashful as he turns away from Hannibal who now stands two or three feet away. It's not untrue, and he doesn't say it to put himself down, but Will has begun to see that Hannibal dislikes hearing Will describe himself on other people's terms.

The thought of displeasing Hannibal makes him feel uneasy. The thought of Hannibal defending him, even from himself, makes him feel warm.

"They would have gotten used to you." Hannibal says lightly, something dangerous but subdued in the way his words cut off too short to be considered casual inflections from his accent. Will turns to look at Hannibal, focuses his gaze in between Hannibal's eye brows, very close for Will anyway but always a dare when it's pointed at Hannibal.

"Those who know me well know I cannot abide rudeness." Hannibal tips his head as if in response to Will's questioning glance. The minute shift allows a momentary connection to spark between their eyes.

Will sucks in a gasp and lowers his gaze to the floor. He examines the rug for a count of ten. When he looks up, Hannibal has migrated soundlessly to his desk. Will finds that a little disconcerting but takes Hannibal's lead.

He shuffles over to stand across from Hannibal on the other side of the large wooden desk and tests it beneath splayed fingers. He bites back a grimace at the spark of pain that shocks the center of his ruined palm. Hannibal doesn't acknowledge Will as he gingerly flexes his fingers. Will is grateful for the smooth subject change.

"Are you currently working on a case, Will? Or has Jack Crawford given you leave for a sabbatical." Will laughs at the phrasing. Jack wouldn't do that.

"No, there just hasn't been any need for my...for what I do." Jack has been called away to look at a string of murders in New Hampshire. Bodies had turned up in Barnstead, Deerfield, and Hampton, and while they were having difficulties locating the murderer, it was pretty open and shut. He'd talked to Jack about it over the phone for all of two minutes before Jack ended the call and didn't ring him back. That was over a week ago.

"It must be nice," Hannibal says, running a lone finger along his appointment book. They are a musician's fingers. "Having this time to focus on your teaching. Surely the dogs are happy to have you home." He watches them move from the appointment book to a legal pad with a few lines of handwriting he can't read. Will looks away.

"It is nice." *And don't call me Shirley.* He almost says it just to lamely attempt humor, but he doesn't think Hannibal is the type of person to laugh at overdone, unfunny jokes. That he thought to say it at all makes him feel very awkward.

"Would you like to tell me what happened to your hand, Will?" Will's eyes flicker up to Hannibal's nose and then to his fingers on the desk. He knows from experience now that those fingers have saved lives. They have averted death and crisis, and they have held that power countless times before. He swallows.

"I was sleepwalking."

"You were armed with a knife. Before or after you woke up."

"Before," Will says, a little indignantly. "I'm not an attention-seeker, Dr. Lecter." Hannibal bows his head in agreement and Will thinks, *commendation?*

"How did you come to find yourself upon waking?" Hannibal asks easily, withdrawing his hand and leaving the desk to find his seat again. Will follows after, hesitating before he sits as he recalls the memory.

"I was in the yard. The dogs were barking, and the knife was in my hand. I'd been out there all night."

"Were you deliberate with the knife, Will?" He thinks about his answer for a moment before finally sitting down. They each sit on the edges of their seats, making it feel as though the chairs have moved even closer together. An inch or two to the left and Will could brush knees with Hannibal.

He should move. His instincts tell him to move, to shrink away from the doctor, but he wants the closeness being offered to him. It has to be intentional. Nothing Hannibal does is ever done carelessly. If this feels so much like intimacy to Will, it's because Hannibal wants it to feel intimate. He wants him ensconced in the feeling. Rather than fight the wave, he lets it strike him down.

"I don't know why I grabbed it in the first place. The dream wasn't...necessarily violent." He slouches a little, letting himself get comfortable without sitting farther back in the chair.

"Explain."

"There's a...it's a stag that I see sometimes. In my dreams, or when I'm—" Will falters, pulling his legs in. "I see it when I'm awake, too."

"Do you feel threatened by the beast?"

"No." Will answers with certainty. "No, never. I should, but I don't. It gored me once with its antlers and held me underwater until I drowned, but I didn't drown. No, I..." Will scratches at his stubble with his uninjured hand. "I just stopped breathing, and then it let me up. But that was a different dream." He raises his eye brows once, forgetting why he brought it up and wondering why he wasn't afraid.

"Is it often hostile towards you?"

"I wouldn't say it's hostile." Will hedges. "More that it's aggressive and inherently violent. It's not for me or because of me. I don't think it has anything to do with me."

"Killing you has everything to do with you, Will." Will is about to argue when Hannibal continues. "Dreams of your own death can be attributed to feelings of repression. Do you feel repressed, Will?"

"Me, repressed?" *Gee, doctor, that's a keen theory you've got there.* He flinches at his own sarcasm. His saving grace is that Hannibal seems to have grown accustomed to Will's sass by now. The delighted crinkling at the edges of Hannibal's eyes suggests he takes some form of amusement from it.

He figures while that's slightly inappropriate for a psychiatrist, it's probably there for Will's benefit. Point being, he finds comfort in it. At least Hannibal doesn't find him completely petulant.

He doesn't know when he started to crave Hannibal's approval, but there it is. He ducks his head, embarrassed, and wonders vaguely what it would be like to channel the Zen master, to see the world the way Hannibal sees it. But that's a bad thought to have, so Will leaves it up on a shelf somewhere in his brain for a later time when the man himself isn't staring him down.

"More than the fact of your repression, we are left to deal with your attitude towards it."

"You mean, how do I feel about it, Dr. Lecter?" Will lets his cheeky grin show.

"In a manner of speaking, yes." Hannibal crosses his legs. "If that is an unacceptable topic, I would hear more about the stag."

More about the stag it is. Will thinks for a moment, sorting through the most relevant information.

"It's only killed me twice before."

"Except you were not killed."

"No," Will removes his glasses to rub at his eyes. "If it had been real, I would've been, but in the dream, I—I think it was just a way for me to become something else. I don't know what." He shakes his head.

"And last night, did you become something else?" Hannibal is leaning forward. Will notes the shift in his chest where he's staring blearily at Hannibal's tie. It disappears beneath a dark gray vest. The deep purple double Windsor knot makes him look regal. He doesn't need it.

"Last night was different. I made the first move." He clarifies, "Not to kill it. Just—I touched it. I reached forward, and I..." He blinks, and the room jumps inexplicably. When it rights itself, he's standing with his injured hand extended, the hand he used to touch the stag.

For a split second in time, he sees it there before him, breathing and staring. Its heartbeat is wild. Will feels it hammering against his ribcage, damaging everything it touches. It's so close to pain, but he doesn't want it to stop. He blinks, and the stag is gone. He steps back, confused, and catches his foot on the armchair. He rights himself with his wounded hand, and he can feel the slices in the flesh of his palm rip all the way open, sharp and fast like a Band-Aid coming off.

Hannibal stands at the pained noise Will makes and takes him by the arm to a chair next to the desk. He all but places Will in the chair and walks to the far wall where he picks up a First-Aid kit. He lifts another chair with one hand and deposits it immediately beside Will's.

He expects Hannibal to move it, but the man just sits down where the chair landed. This time their knees do brush, and Will can't turn away without taking his bloody hand away with him.

"You should have gotten stitches sooner, Will. These cuts will continue to re-open without them."

"Well, it's a good thing you're a doctor then, I guess." Will mutters, only partially sarcastic now. He likes the idea of Hannibal stitching him up better than some random faceless nurse in a sickly, noisy hospital. His brain can't handle all that death and panic and dread at once, especially not with the way things have been going in the field lately.

"It is a good thing." Hannibal disinfects the area. Will watches.

His hands are all quick movements and precision, and it barely even hurts when the needle passes through. Will wants to attribute that to Hannibal's medical expertise, but he can't tell right now with how his brain has been processing pain.

Hannibal's eyes don't stray from the task at hand, but he does speak. His voice is surprisingly soft when he says: "You were telling me about your dream."

Will is glad he doesn't call it a nightmare, even if he is slightly less glad to detect the quaintly hidden demand in the words. He wants to talk about the stag, wants someone to *know* about the stag, so he ignores his *attitude* concerning Hannibal's bossy, though subtly so, interrogation tactics.

"It's like when I touched it, it was able to *show* me. There was this—" Will shuts his eyes against the tugging of the needle at his palm. The feeling is reminiscent of antlers going into bloom. He plays off the muted noise in the back of his throat as a stuttered wince, but it's something else he really doesn't want to put a name to.

He thinks he feels Hannibal's hands go still for just a fraction of a second, but he isn't sure. He doesn't want to know, so he rushes through the next part. "It *did* something, and everything else was just gone. It was the two of us, me and the stag, and its antlers grew out, bigger than this room, even. It was—"

Will dials it back a bit, hearing the nearly fanatical chord in his words. He's explaining something that isn't real. He shouldn't get so worked up. "And then it stopped like it was waiting for me to—to reciprocate? I guess?"

"And did you?"

"I broke its antle-" Will's breath catches on the last syllable in the back of his throat. "I broke two in my hands." He says, quietly, when the words return to him.

"How did it react?" Hannibal cuts the thread from the first sewn up cut. Will isn't great with crosshatch stitching, but even from his angle, it looks really good; neat and symmetrical. He moves onto the second line of red flesh, head bent over Will's arm.

"It was excited." Will breathes, examining the part in Hannibal's hair. He could lean in and brush his lips against it. He blinks, trying to sit up straighter in his seat but only succeeding in nudging Hannibal's arm with his chest.

"Will," He freezes. "Please be still."

He does. He stays very, very still. He doesn't even inch away from Hannibal's arm where his chest still presses against it. He can probably feel Will's heart beating frantically, trying to cope with confused yet passionate emotions; a few of them being directed at or inspired by the good doctor.

Seemingly oblivious to the pounding in Will's chest, Hannibal continues his work on Will's hand. He is halfway finished, and when he says nothing to prompt Will to finish telling him about his dream, Will hesitantly picks up where he left off.

"The antlers grew again. When I was holding them, I mean, they…" He nods his head as if to confirm to himself that it happened that way. "We were all tangled up. The tines, you know? I couldn't get away."

"Did you want to?"

"I'm not sure." The answer makes him uncomfortable because it's not a hundred percent true. He knows Hannibal can tell even though he doesn't push it.

"You found true harmony with another being. It can be difficult to pull away from such a pure union."

"You think it's pure?" Will asks, not entirely because he disagrees but because he's fascinated and wants to hear Hannibal's reasoning. He does disagree, simply on principle. He doesn't think anything that murderous or carnal could be pure.

"It is pure in the way that only animals can be pure." The murmur that Hannibal's voice declines to does crazy, unreal things to Will's stomach. He thinks he's in that dream world with the stag for a moment with the way everything else seems to fracture and dissolve from Will's vision when he looks at Hannibal. His voice is like the stag's antlers, scarring the galaxies with its divinity, with its new Creation.

"When you are with it, you are, yourself, like an animal." Distracted enough with the soft look of Hannibal's hair, Will averts his eyes to his hand. Hannibal dabs a clean bit of gauze over the little blood that trickles out of the tail end of the unstitched cut.

He wonders about the stag, about what he would have done in his dream if the stag had bled out of its antlers when Will broke them. He wonders how he knew to break them in the first place. It seemed so natural in his dream, but he couldn't see it now in the sobering light of day.

"Like an animal, animalistic," Will mumbles to himself, well aware of how insane it is trying to assign an MO to a figment of his imagination. "Survival instincts, primal urges; like killing for your mate."

It's the first thing that pops into his head, and it's the only one he says out loud. He thinks it fits the stag. It never tried to break him; only to build him up and craft Will into what it knew he could be. It's almost like when it killed Will, it was doing it to bring out something dormant within him: the thing residing beneath the skin and the rules, beneath the empathy—or perhaps *within* the empathy.

A cloudy tunnel vision falls over Will, and all he can see are Hannibal's hands on his close but not quite touching. Then that fades out, too, and something very crazy happens.

Wind hisses in his ears. His nervous system hums. Only the impression of the moon is left in the sky; the stars are all burnt out. A thunderous voice shakes Will through to his core.

"You aren't ready for me yet, but you will be." It has no sound; only meaning and intent.

Something in it feels heartbroken. It hurts Will more than the noise, more than the flames engulfing them both when they lash at his flesh.

The stag thrashes, flinging blood everywhere from its thick pelt. It gets in Will's eyes, turning his vision red. It turns everything red, red. The taste in his mouth isn't of rust or salt. It has no taste, only sensation. It is running through a field with the raw earth beneath bare feet; it is elation; it is pain; it is the very essence of life. Will shakes at his core with the intensity of the feeling. It's like nothing else he's ever felt before.

"You'll be ready for me soon. You want to be ready for me. You need me."

He can feel that he does want that. He wants to offer something in return for the small taste the stag gives him. He wants to be the thing it has waited for him to be. He wants more of that feeling the stag promises. He wants it in full. He wants to bleed with it.

The beast rears back on its hind legs. Feathers and bones litter the floor. They're in the woods again. The trees are on fire, but the stag's eyes still burn brighter. The maroon coals flicker blue as if to reflect Will's eyes as he watches the animal in its element. His eyes are amazed, and they are infatuated. And they are not afraid, even as the maroon snuffs them out from the edges inward.

"You can never go back. You were made for this. Can't you see? Don't you see me?"

He tastes ash and blood in his mouth. He's afraid now, but not of the stag. He knows he should be this time, but he is only afraid of himself. He's afraid of his curiosity and of his

desire to belong here with the stag. He doesn't know what he must do to earn his place here with such a monster.

"Look at me."

He does. He feels adoration and acceptance.

"I know you see me."

He will, soon. He has to.

"Your stag is an impressive creature." Hannibal muses, startling Will. He manages to catch his eye for a brief second as they flutter open. Had he said something? Before Will can ask, Hannibal is looking down to cut the thread. "He is showing off for you."

He has a retort, but his breath is considerably more labored than it should be, so he takes a moment to set it back to normal. He hunches back into his chair, self-consciously shrinking away from Hannibal. They are still seated too closely together.

Will lightly wiggles his fingers against the stitches and accidentally grazes Hannibal's wrist with his middle finger. The small brush of sensation shoots an interesting current of warmth down his spine. It feels enough like the flames that it scares and invigorates him. Hannibal doesn't pay any mind and proceeds to wrap Will's hand with clean bandages. They feel nicer than the ones Will used, and he does a much better job on top of that.

"He's got a funny way of showing off." Will grumbles when his words finally return to him and he feels adjusted enough to speak without his voice breaking. He realizes too late that he's given the stag an identifiable gender.

"I'm curious," Hannibal straightens in his chair but does not move away. "Do you think it has manifested as an internalized response to your work with Jack Crawford?" *Leading the witness.*

"If it did, it's what's happening in me. I try not to think about it."

"Why not?" Hannibal still hasn't moved his chair away. Will almost wants to tell him what he just saw, where he just went, but he's terrified thinking about it. Of all the bad things in his head, this one thing that torments him is his doing. He made it. It came from him. He doesn't want to know what that says about him. He doesn't want to know if he's a monster of the same caliber. He can't ask because Hannibal will tell him.

"Maybe I won't like the answer I come up with." He chances a glance at Hannibal to find him smiling. They lock eyes for just a moment before Hannibal unbuttons his jacket with a deft flick of his thumb and forefinger. Will stands when Hannibal does.

"We will discuss it another day. For now, I'm afraid, our time is up." Will checks his watch. They're twenty minutes over.

"Sorry." He blurts out. "I didn't realize we were talking so long."

"I enjoy our long talks." Hannibal says smoothly, nearly cooing at Will with his accent and his cheekbones. *Stop it, Will.*

"It wasn't much of a talk toward the end."

"I enjoy learning about you in whatever capacity you will allow." Hannibal revises, looking at him full-on. Will feels an internal nudge to return the good doctor's stare, so he does. They watch each other, and Will feels inexplicably anchored in the moment. His feet feel rooted in the ground, and the constant cacophony in Will's head rumbles down into a few scrapes and hisses until there's nothing more than the faint hum of the air conditioner. Will swallows convulsively around a mouthful of air.

Channeling the Zen master...

The name is apt, as Will can pick up absolutely nothing from him. There is silence, and when Will attunes his ears to it, he can make out his own scattered train of thought disturbing the void where the din of everyone else's thoughts usually fills it.

There is a strange tugging at his center of gravity. He hobbles with it. Hannibal is holding the door in one hand and leaning his body slightly toward Will. He smells cologne, or maybe a modest aftershave. He briefly imagines falling at Hannibal's feet, and it hardly even sounds like a bad idea.

"I will see you next week, Will." Hannibal bows his head, eyes not leaving Will's with the gesture. Will blinks and looks away. *Shit, how long was I staring at him?*

"Jack willing." He tries to laugh, but the sentiment just depresses him and does nothing to distract from their prolonged staring contest that has Will feeling at least a dozen types of ridiculous. His laugh sounds as bitter as he feels just thinking about being carted off to God knows where, away from his dogs, away from the Academy, away from Hanni—

"If duty calls, you know you are welcome to call me anytime." Will can tell Hannibal means anytime, and though he doesn't feel like falling now, his chest feels heavy and full. His heart is racing in his chest, beating obnoxiously in his throat.

"Thank you." Will says, his voice painfully shy and quiet. *God, that's embarrassing.*

"Of course, Will." Hannibal waits for Will to turn and walk stiffly out of the patients' exit. Will doesn't check to see, but he's positive Hannibal stands there and watches him leave until he's out the door and in the parking lot.

The Wasp (Texas Radio and the Big Beat)

Chapter Summary

A string of murders takes Will to Pennsylvania, and Will makes a new friend (not really). Will consults Hannibal on the case.

Chapter Notes

Comes out of the Virginia swamps cool and slow with plenty of precision/With a back beat narrow and hard to master/Some call it heavenly in its brilliance

Jack buys him an espresso macchiato at a Starbucks five minutes from the Genetti Hotel where they're set up and talks the case while they walk out into the cold street. It's chilly in Williamsport. It's a cloudy, rainy Monday, and Will would rather not be upright or outdoors. He'd *like* to be home with the dogs listening to Miles Davis. Failing that, he could turn on some classical music and pretend Hannibal was listening with him. He sips at the scalding hot beverage Jack pressed into his hands. It's not as good as the one Hannibal made for him, but then, cold weather tends to make him overly critical.

Jack says something with a lift at the end. It sounds like a question, or maybe another one of Jack's dead-end theories. Will blinks. "Hmm?"

"Are you even listening, Will?"

He wasn't, no. Jack had been repeating himself like a broken record all day. Will started to tune him out right around when they passed Willow Street. His thoughts could be put to better use elsewhere, like trying to conjure up a casual outfit for Hannibal to wear in his day-off fantasy with Bach and the dogs and probably wonderful, exotic food.

Will sighs at Jack's wordless glare. He's clearly meant to give some sort of noncommittal reply. *No, Jack. I was wondering if Hannibal ever wears jeans and a t-shirt when no one's looking. Have any input on that?*

"You think the killer will strike again tonight. She's been consistent; city workers keep finding the bodies in highly populated areas, not unlike the Ripper but *not* the Ripper; decidedly not artistic enough. Guy driving a dump truck found one this morning. Local police made a mess. They know now to leave the next one with us, assuming she leaves us a body to find.

"Yeah, I know how you feel about assumptions, Jack. I'm not assuming anything, but I told you. Despite what Zeller and Price say about how unpredictable our girl is, she's been leaving us breadcrumbs for a reason. She *wants* us to catch her." He mumbles monotonously, taking another drink from his increasingly disappointing espresso. Jack just looks at him for a minute before looking ahead again.

"Be careful, Will."

"You called me out here, Jack. Let's not talk circles around each other."

"Give me something new then."

"There is nothing new yet. Katz will call when she finds it."

"You said something at the crime scene."

"I've been known to do that." Will scoffs. He nearly drops his coffee when Jack yanks him to a stop where they're walking on the sidewalk.

Will waits and doesn't so much as brace himself for what looks like a blow to the chin or nose. Jack takes a second to compose himself before sighing and walking off. Will catches up with him when they come up around 4th Street and the Genetti Hotel looms overhead like a skyscraper.

"I know I'm keeping you around for the way you think and not your bedside manner—"

"Though there has been a lot of bullshit about the way I think." Will laughs dryly.

"But these people are scared," Jack turns sharply on Will. "And we've got a serial killer taking one victim every day we can't catch her. At the crime scene, you said something." Jack repeats, his voice only a pantomime of patience.

Will stops to look around. It's quiet out. Only a few cars drive past every now and then. Everyone's on high alert with the rising body count. Their killer was up to six now. He sighs.

"You said she doesn't want to be doing this anymore, that that's why we're gonna catch her."

"Eventually, yeah. That's the endgame. She probably won't even run when you do find her."

"Why?" Will looks at him.

"Jack, she's a victim, too. She thinks she's doing this because it's all she's good for. Somebody, one of the first men she killed, got it in her head that she was born to be their slave, and now that she's killed her masters, she's taken up the knife to continue their work. Only she's—" Will scrubs his hands across his face. The chilled afternoon air has grown thick and heavy like mire, like the blood when it dries on her skin and they don't let her wash it, like the blood in all those corpses she left behind, like last words and dead eyes...

"Hey," Jack snaps his fingers. Will's eyes follow his middle finger as it goes in slow motion like a body falling again, again, again. "She's what, Will?"

The noise of a few cars driving by rumbles like thunder in Will's ears. It's too cold again. He holds his cup tighter in his fingers, blinking away the images of shredded flesh and bodies with their mouths left open like gutted fish that never scream.

"She's, um, trying to save them from the men who hurt her. But it's like she became them instead." He shakes his head. The truth is in there somewhere. He just hasn't quite found it yet. "Maybe she thinks her victims will end up evil sadists if she doesn't stop them, Jack. Maybe she thinks they'll come back for her if she doesn't keep the act up. I don't know. I don't *know* her yet."

"Well, you find a way to know her, Will. I promised I'd get you the next crime scene fresh if it comes to that, but I don't want it to come to that."

"You think I'm not connecting with her on purpose? I don't want anyone else to have to die just because we don't see her yet, Jack. But if I don't have all the clues, what do you expect me to do? I can't just make shit up and hope it sticks." Jack's nostrils flare at Will's tone. He thinks he probably hit impudent at least half a dozen times since they left Starbucks.

"You listen to me, Special Agent Graham." *Yeah, it must have been impudence.* "You need to get your head in the game. You think I haven't noticed you've been off since Buddish?" Will looks away, not because he's embarrassed to be caught but because this whole confrontation is ridiculous. "You're gonna be on your best behavior until this psycho's behind bars. When no one's looking, you can act any way you like."

"With your permission, Jack."

"You're damn right with my permission."

Jack walks into the hotel without waiting for Will. He manages to catch the door, though it takes out his coffee. Much of it spills on him, which Will counts as a favor to him and the drink except for how hot it is. One of the bellhops sees Will's scuffle with the door and rushes over to clean the mess up off the floor. Will gives him a five for his trouble and wrings the front of his shirt out over a square of dirt where some peonies have been planted before walking inside.

He rides the elevator up to four alone and takes a quick shower before joining Jack and everyone else on the third floor. There are grunt FBI agents and local police scrambling around the hall, and Will wonders how much it cost to make this arrangement work. The hotel's pretty swanky by Will's standards. He can't imagine either agency coughing up the money to foot the bill.

Katz sees him first. She's carrying a small tower of files that looks ready to topple over. He thinks to take some of the weight off the load but has second thoughts, wondering if she's the kind of woman to swat at a man for helping. He decides to do it anyway because he likes her, and why not make it a little bit easier on her?

It turns out she isn't the type to swat. He gets a smile and a thank you for his help, though she adds in a side comment that she totally had it before he showed up all macho and chivalrous. "It's just to prove that I can be macho and chivalrous." Will says jokingly. "Which actually

makes me macho and not chivalrous, so..." She laughs at him, and the genuine ring to it washes out the dark memories that aren't his and makes his chest feel lighter.

That feeling drains away a bit when they walk into the Garden Room where FBI and local police alike have taken the space over completely. He finds Jack over by a map with victims' picture pinned to it. Some agents have been working on finding an intersection between their last known locations and where their bodies were found. She left them where she butchered them, ruling out a lair or anything of the sort.

Will watches the clock complacently. In eight to twelve hours another man will go missing. Sometime tonight or tomorrow morning, they'll be at the scene, and Jack will leave Will to divine some sort of truth from the body. *Maybe she'll gut the next one and I can look at the entrails like the druids used to. Maybe she'll leave the future for me in the gall bladder and small intestine.*

Someone collides with him hard, and when he looks it's some lab tech. The guy's local. Will thinks he got his name sometime yesterday when they landed, but it escapes him now. He's blond, younger than Will, and pretty well-built. He could be military. The guy's still giving him a dirty look when another local cop calls him over. His name's Casson. Jake Casson, or James Casson? It doesn't matter in the grand scheme of things. Once they catch this killer, and they will, eventually, they'll be off to Virginia again, and Will won't have to look at his seething mug anymore. He wonders what the hell the guy's problem is.

Katz comes to collect the files he's still carrying and watches the guy go. She makes a disapproving sound when she notices Will watching him, too. He takes his eyes away.

"Just a local guy angry we had to step in and look at his business. Don't worry about him."

"Who's worried?" Will tries to smile, but by the way she looks at him, he can tell it came off wrong. "If he gives me any trouble, I can take care of myself. I’m macho." She does smile a little at that, less because she's reassured and more because his spunk amuses her. He has a headache. He'll take what he can get.

"Will, come and look at this." They both look up when Jack calls, and after a second's hesitation, Katz turns and walks to another section of the room. Will goes to see what Jack wants and is greeted by some bloody photographs of victims one and two.

"Reed Belmont and Justin Kilpatrick." Will recites from memory. She ripped Belmont’s tongue out of his mouth and crammed it down his throat after he was dead. Kilpatrick got the worst of her wrath. She castrated him and stomped on the detached phallus until it looked like spiders do after they’re stepped on. They had both died from other causes; opened veins for Belmont and multiple subdural hematomas for Kilpatrick.

"We've been trying to connect them to a woman who fits the profile you drew up of our killer. No leads until today. The only thing they have in common is the days off they took from work. Their credit card statements suggest they went fishing those days."

"And what, you think it was a cover so they could take the day to torture her?"

"I'm saying maybe if they were spending money on fishing anyway, maybe they had a boat on the marina they used to keep her in. Can't fake a boating story without a boat."

"Yeah, maybe." Will says, eyes glossing over the map again for something he missed.

"I want you to come check the marina with me. No one's looked at this guy's boat yet. It's always been the alibi, so it's always looked clean on paper. Maybe we'll be able to verify whether they actually abused this woman or not."

"You think they weren't?"

"I think we haven't been able to verify whether they were or not." Jack says, calculated in his choice of words.

"Why don't you take one of the local cops, make some friends. We're not in good standing with them." He says tiredly, pushing his glasses up his nose. He sees Casson watching him out the corner of his eye.

"They can't do what you do, Will. How is anyone else gonna walk in and know if a boat doubled as a torture chamber?"

"If they kept up appearances, I probably wouldn't be able to tell anyway. Whether it's big enough to hold three people, even uncomfortably, should tell you enough. If the clean-up looks like a bitch, it's a long shot, but I wouldn't rule it out. Any blood or long hairs at the scene could tip you off, but other than that, Jack, anybody else would be just as useful as me." Will turns his head to look directly at Casson, focusing his eyes somewhere on the man's shiny forehead. He'd be handsome if he smiled. Frowning he looks like a frog. "Take Casson. He could use the exercise."

Jack looks between Casson and Will and then steps in front of Will so his line of vision is blocked.

"I'm asking you."

"It didn't sound like you were asking me."

"Well, I'm asking you now, Will. Come with me." *Still not asking nicely, Jack.*

"All right, fine." Will shakes his head hopelessly. "But when it turns out the boat angle was a lost cause and we still can't verify whether those two men were what I said they were, don't say I didn't try to save you the time."

Jack looks like he wants to smack Will again but doesn't. It wouldn't do to strangle one of his own in a room full of people just looking for an excuse to flout the chain of command. He takes a deep breath and grabs his jacket off the back of a chair.

"Thin ice, Will."

"Yeah, the thing about ice," Will follows him out of the room into the hall. "Just before you fall through, it cracks."

The boat is a bust. The most Will can say is maybe they held her in the cabin and cleaned everything religiously. Jack is not happy, but he says nothing about it on the drive back from Albrightsville. He leaves Will in the lobby without an invitation to come back up to three. It's been mutually agreed upon that Will needs some distance from the case. He has a few hours to kill before Jack definitely needs him again and thinks the best way to gain some distance would be to leave Williamsport for a while.

It's eight thirty when he goes back to his room on four and dials Hannibal's cell. Their killer is probably prowling now, looking for someone to grab, though she won't take anyone until much later. There's no way to know exactly when she abducted the others, but time of death fell somewhere in between midnight and six in the morning for all six so far. Hannibal answers after the second ring.

"Hello, Will."

"Dr. Lecter." He's a little surprised to hear him answer so promptly, but then, it is Hannibal. He feels strange suddenly for addressing him so formally when he is always *Hannibal* in his thoughts.

"How is Williamsport. Have you made headway with the case?"

"Williamsport is cold, and everyone hates us." He shrugs out of his jacket. "I, especially, made a friend. As for the case, no, not really. We know a little bit more than we did on Sunday, but it's mostly still over our heads. Someone else will probably die tonight." It bothers him that he isn't more distressed at the thought, but it's crucial at this point in the investigation that they have as much information as they can get their hands on. They need more clues, and another body will give them more clues. Will needs a stronger impression of the killer for context, and another crime scene will provide that.

"A necessary evil." Hannibal postulates, sounding every bit like a mathematician or philosopher in his easy analysis of the problem at hand. "The only way to catch killers is to study their kills, and for that, more must die."

"You make it sound so commonplace."

"Murder is commonplace. People have been doing it for thousands of years. There is a reason the scribes who wrote the bible did not exclude the story of Cain and Abel."

"You mean because Cain was just trying to be like God?" He recalls what Hannibal said about God killing his followers in church while they worshipped Him; that it must have felt good. Will wonders if it counts as smiting since God's hand came in the form of a roof that men built.

"I mean because it would not help their cause to censor such a natural human inclination."

"I hardly think people killing people is natural."

"No?" Will hears something on the other line, like a muffled thump or a door slamming. "Human sacrifice has often been practiced as a way to appease the gods and punish mankind for sins committed."

"So has cannibalism." Will scoffs, despite the fact that he's enjoying this unlikely conversation about murder in ancient times. It seems like a fitting topic to discuss with Hannibal, though. He is a man of medicine, both of the mind and the body. He has a vast understanding of why and how people take life.

"To my knowledge, cannibalism has never been formally practiced at the state level. Murder on the other hand."

"You're referring to the death penalty."

"The death penalty, but also the Salem witch trials before that and the gladiators in Rome before that."

"So when I report back to Jack, I should tell him our killer is an easily bored human being with natural urges."

"You may tell Jack whatever you like, Will. Do forgive me, I thought we were philosophizing."

"I'm sorry." Will finds that he really is. "We just always talk work, and I take it for granted that you can keep up."

"I believe I have held my own in the past." Hannibal says in a tone that suggests he's up for the challenge. Will feels guilty about that, but he takes the bait. He's sure he can glean some new insight from Hannibal. He's been unfailingly helpful in the past, and it's true, he's always been able to hold his own. It was stupid of Will to phrase it like that: *I take it for granted that you can keep up.*

"I didn't mean that you usually don't keep up." He stammers. "It's just that, it sometimes feels like you're right on track with everything that's going on. I forget you're not always involved in the FBI part of my life."

"My services are available to you whenever you require them, Will. You should know that by now."

"I do." Will nods, then stops because no one can see him. "I do, thank you."

"You are welcome." Hannibal says pleasantly. "Now, about your killer."

"She kills men." Will says quickly, grateful for the subject change. "I think she knew her first two victims, that they had some kind of sexual relationship that went horribly wrong."

"A relationship involving the three of them?"

"Yeah, and I think they were hurting her habitually. It started out as part of the deal, and they were all happy with it, but then one of them took it too far, and things got out of hand."

"You have found no proof of this?"

"No," Will rubs at his forehead. "No, Jack found a boat they kept on the marina that looks big enough to fit the three of them, but there's nothing forensic we can use. The people who knew them never saw any woman, and as far as I can tell, the only real shred of evidence I have in my favor is that they were both killed on the same night. There has to be some significance there because it's the only thing I've been able to use."

"When you see through her eyes, the first two victims look different than the others."

"They're *important.* The rest of them are fodder. I can't explain it without—I never saw that crime scene or the one after. Only pictures. The crime scene today was practically useless." Will laughs bitterly, tossing back an aspirin. "Jack wants to get me to the next one before anyone treads all over it, but even then, I don't know how much use I'll be to him. It won't tell us anything about that first night, and that's the one that's gonna tell us who she is."

"Her magnum opus. You think the others are merely reproductions."

"I think she lost something when she killed for the first time. She doesn't want to do this; that much I can tell. I think she's a broken horse taking cues from a cruel master."

"She wants you to find her because she has no wish to be cruel." Will nods, then answers in the affirmative. "It would appear, then, that she is not killing as herself. Perhaps adopting the mindset she finds herself in when she takes life will give you more of an insight into what kind of men the first two victims really were."

"That's actually… If she's mimicking them, maybe this whole thing is just an elaborate plot to expose them for what they were. She can’t confess to killing them because people might not ever know the truth about what they did, but she *needs* people to know, so she does this."

"Jack may want to know about that." Hannibal says lightly, and Will smiles because he thinks he hears a tiny joke somewhere in the even tone of his voice. "Tell me about this friend you made." Hannibal says after a moment.

"Uh," Will thinks. "Right, Casson. Just a local guy. Keeps giving me eyes."

"Are you certain he is not doing so out of attraction?" Will laughs outright at that.

"I'm pretty sure."

"Perhaps you will need to have a talk with him. Staring is very rude."

"If he becomes a problem, I'm sure Jack will take care of it. He's strict about personal stuff on the job anyway, but when it interferes with work, he takes no prisoners."

"I would expect nothing less. Might I make a suggestion, Will?"

"Go ahead."

"Leave Jack and the others to their own devices and try to sleep tonight. Jack will undoubtedly call you out to another crime scene before the sun is up. You will need the rest." Will fidgets, trying to think of a decent response. It shouldn't confuse him anymore when Hannibal tries to take care of him, even from a distance. Of course Hannibal picks up on his hesitation. "How long has it been since you slept, Will?"

"Um, a few days, I guess." Hannibal makes a noise. Will thinks he's affronted by the idea.

"Your body needs sleep, Will. Your mind also. Sleep tonight, please."

"Yeah, sure. I'll try." Will mumbles, embarrassed. His father used to get short with him for not sleeping. That's a weird thought, comparing Hannibal to his father. That would definitely go down swimmingly in therapy. "You're right. I need to sleep. I know I do." He shakes his head.

"Do your bad dreams wake you?"

"Sometimes. Other times I just can’t sleep."

"What if I could help you with that?"

We Could Be So Good Together

Chapter Summary

Guided meditation with Hanny and Will feat. the staggiest of all stags and a waterfall.

Chapter Notes

I tell you lies/I tell you wicked lies/Tell you about the world that we'll invent/Wanton world without lament

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He's reluctant to ask at all. Although he hardly thinks Hannibal would even suggest something like it, Will immediately thinks of some weird sexualized meditation. *Oh, what the hell.* "How?"

"Lay back and get comfortable." He hears something elastic-sounding as Hannibal shuffles on the other line. Will kicks off his shoes and pants before following Hannibal's instructions. *Hey, doctor's orders.* As awkward as it would be, he wonders briefly what sort of stuff Hannibal would say if he were going to do sexualized guided meditation. Not that Will is curious about that. He does think Hannibal would be good at it, though. Hannibal's good at everything.

"Are you comfortable, Will?"

"Yes," Will takes off his glasses and blinks at the ceiling. "Oh, hang on." He gets up to turn out the light and then stumbles back to bed in the dark. "Okay."

"Have you ever been guided in meditation?" *Oh, shit.*

"No?"

"Is that a question?" Hannibal muses. Will can hear his teasing smile from over a hundred miles away.

"No, it's not a question." *Smart ass.*

"There is something I would like to try with your permission." *With my permission. How do you like that, Jack?* "If you wish not to continue, we will try something else."

"What is it?" Will nearly has a heart attack in the spaces between his and Hannibal's words.

"Getting you to sleep will not be the difficult part about this exercise. Keeping you asleep and keeping the bad dreams at bay are the challenge."

"So you're gonna try to pick the dream I have?"

"I want to plant a seed as you fall asleep, and perhaps your mind will play along."

"It is pretty good at that." Will nods. He wishes he had alcohol. Hannibal would know if he got up to get some. "What's the dream? I'm standing under a waterfall, or oh, I'm flying over Alaska." Will laughs.

"I thought something more practical. Have you ever been to a waterfall, Will?"

"I went to Great Falls Park once in college."

"Good. I want you to imagine you are there on the rock face of the waterfall."

"Should I close my eyes?"

"If you would prefer." The teasing tone again. Will closes his eyes.

"I'm on the rock face of the waterfall, doctor. What next?"

"Your feet and legs are wet, but the water is warm around you. You hear it rushing in your ears over the cliff. The sky is open and endless. You are all alone in the park but for a few birds that fly overhead. What kind of birds are they, Will?" Will doesn't expect an answer to come easily, but the image solidifies in his mind, and he is speaking before he can reconsider his words.

"They're falcons." Will relaxes into the bed and lays the phone flat against his ear. He wants to ask if Hannibal can hear them screech in Baltimore. "Two falcons flying together."

"Is the sun out, Will?"

"Yes, only a few clouds." He thinks it must be that Hannibal's voice soothes him, but more and more he can feel water trickling between his toes and sun shining down on his head. He reaches up to ruffle his hair where it gets too hot and almost snaps himself out of it. "Um, it's kind of hot out."

"Then let there be shade." Hannibal's inside his daydream then, his voice is just behind Will, but he can't turn and look. He wants to, but his eyes are fixed forward to look out over the waterfall. At the very suggestion of shade, the few clouds in the sky skip across the sun and blot it out. The rest of the sky continues to move around it, briefly panicking Will, but the breeze turns cool. The water tickles at his shins where his pants are rolled up. It only looks like they've broken the world.

It feels like an hour passes with Will watching the clouds block the sun just for him before Hannibal speaks again. His voice is soft.

"Do you wish to explore the waterfall?"

"Yes," Will says, if only to be able to turn and look upon Hannibal as he appears in his dreamscape. *Jeans and a t-shirt, jeans and a t-shirt.*

"You may then." And just like that, Will remembers how to unstick his feet from the rock face. He wonders how Hannibal even knew he couldn't move. Will turns on a dime, quickly, to catch Hannibal in the act of invading his dream, but there is no one there. He is still all alone. Whichever direction he faces, Hannibal's voice is always just behind him.

"What do you see around you, Will?"

"Trees in the distance. A lot of rocks. There's a trail behind me." After a moment of examination, he says, "No one's on it."

"Do you wish to go down the trail, Will?"

"No." He turns back to the waterfall and stops in his tracks. "Huh."

"What?"

"Could I jump down there?" He remembers Hannibal can't see what he's referring to. "I mean, there's water at the bottom. Could I jump? Or would my brain think I died?"

"Do you trust that you are safe in bed in your hotel room in Williamsport, Pennsylvania?"

"Well, right now, not so much." He scrunches his toes against the stone beneath his feet. Will wonders if he isn't already asleep and Hannibal has long since hung up. "I don't even know if you're here right now."

"I suppose you will not allow me to prove to you that I am."

"No way to know I'm not making it up." Will takes a few careful steps over the side of the rock face, briefly imagines himself lying flat in bed and loses his balance. He sucks in a surprised breath.

"Will?"

"I'm here." He trots back toward the trail, sufficiently frightened now at the thought of falling to his death at the bottom of a make-believe waterfall. "I can't tell if I'm dreaming or if I'm awake."

"Hardly a novel feeling for you anymore."

"Touché." Will grumbles. "Guess I'm going down the trail."

He walks for a while, and he swears another hour passes in silence. A few birds chirp, hidden from his sight. It’s autumn on the tail, and he can see that the barren branches hold no nests. He figures it's his confusion manifesting in his mind and thinks psychoanalyzing himself is not going to make this any easier, so he stops trying to pinpoint the happy sounds as they ping and echo all around him.

"What time is it?"

"About nine thirty." Hannibal answers easily.

"Jesus, we've been on the phone for an hour already."

"I told you before I enjoy our long talks." Something in his voice changes and becomes subtly delicate and informal. It might be that it's a slightly nostalgic thing to say, but Hannibal feels impossibly closer. It's almost like he's not only in the dream but in the complex fabric of synapses and neurons that make up every pigment and texture of the dream. His voice transcends physical boundaries. It's inside Will's ears and in his corpus collosum connecting both hemispheres of his brain. It vibrates in his chest.

"Are you doing that on purpose?" Will asks when he can't stand it anymore.

"Doing what, Will?"

"You're in my head." He answers gruffly, as if he's put upon and not just a little bit pleased.

"I must be in order to guide you."

"I should have known. This was all just a ploy to get in my proverbial pants." Hannibal's answering laugh surprises him. He sounds surprised and gleeful.

"Should I ever desire to get into your proverbial pants, I now know the way." Laughter apparently is contagious. The combined sounds of his and Hannibal's laughter bounces along down the empty trail, loud like a gunshot.

"No such thing as a pointless talent." Will offers, tripping over a rock in the trail. He hears a snake slither by. He doesn't bother trying to find it. "What am I looking for?"

"Whatever you want, Will. The sky is the limit."

Will looks up at the sky. He can't really grasp what an infinite object would look or feel like, but the sky looks pretty endless. He thinks about all the impossible things he could bring into this place (impossible *good* things) like Hannibal in jeans and a t-shirt, which he can't let go for some reason.

"Right now I'd like some company." He looks back down at the ground and finds some people have found their way to the trail. At first they have no faces, but as they walk by, he begins to recognize people he went to school with. Some of them are young: Amanda Cline from grade school and Heidi Goldsmith from junior high. He sees Jess Nixon from college, one of the first people he ever befriended and stayed friends with for more than a year.

They pass him up, and they don't see him, and this is much worse than being alone. Further down the path he sees Alana and Jack with Katz, Zeller, and Price, and they don't look at him either. Alana starts to as if she hears someone call her name, but then she shakes it off and faces the group again.

His father is down at the end of the trail with Abigail. They're sitting cross-legged on the dirt floor, looking intently at the fishing rod Will was going to give to her. His father looks up for a moment to bat at a fly but doesn't see Will. He thinks he hears Abigail say his name, but it's lodged into the sentence like a verb or noun rather than a name, so he keeps walking. This is much, much worse than being alone.

"Where the hell are *you?*" He mutters under his breath, tiring of these people who won't acknowledge him.

"I am here, Will." He whips his head around to look behind him, and the trail is empty again. He swears.

"I hear you, but I don't see you." He doesn't mean to say it, but it tumbles freely from his mouth, and damn it to hell, he's pretty sure he's dreaming anyway. "Everyone else was here."

"It is your world, Will. You control what happens."

"I'm still not convinced you're on the phone. This is way too effective."

He starts at the touch of something on his arm. His heart stutters in his chest, and he turns, fully expecting the stag. He gets someone else. He gets Hannibal.

"Oh, there you are." He doesn't even try to hide his relief. He can't remember how to hide anything here. He can't remember how to care about the consequences his words will have, and it's liberating.

"You control this world, Will." Hannibal's hands find his pockets, and Will's nose wrinkles at the sight of the three piece suit he usually enjoys but can see any old time he likes. *If it's my world...*

He laughs softly at the sight of Hannibal in worn denim and a loose white t-shirt. He looks ready for the beach. It's wonderful.

If Hannibal wants to know what he's laughing at, he doesn't ask. Will is thankful he doesn't have to fess up to the Casual Friday kink he apparently developed sometime after getting to know Hannibal. They walk down the path together in more silence. Will is sure hours have passed since he first lay down to go to bed. He had to have been asleep by now.

"Assuming you're still on the phone," Will says slowly, looking at Hannibal now that he can. "How do you know when to hang up?"

"I suppose there is no way to know." The breeze catches his hair. It hasn't been gelled down here, and Will wants very much to touch it, but that feels like a breach of conduct. He's already crossing some etiquette lines dressing Hannibal up the way he wants to as if he were a dolly and not a person. Will looks down to confirm that yes, Hannibal is barefoot also. *Damn the etiquette lines.* "Especially if you talk in your sleep."

"Sorry." He lies.

"Where are we now, Will?"

"End of the trail." Will says, almost mournfully. "There's something here." He looks around expectantly.

"What do you see?" Will looks around when he can bear to tear his eyes away from the sight of an urban-looking Hannibal Lecter. It's still void of other people. The only noises are invisible animals calling out and the dull roar of water cascading over safety railings. Will watches the water for a moment before looking back to Hannibal. Up the trail back the way they came Will sees a pair of calcareous antlers protrude as if they are sprouting out from the earth.

"It's coming." Hannibal turns to look, and the stag approaches warily. It seems bigger this time; the sun picking up the copper tints at the edges of its fur. It looks strange illuminated in direct sunlight. Its feathers glisten like black pearls. Its hooved feet stamp and leave black sooty prints in the dusty trail as it nears them. "Hannibal," Will murmurs, stepping in front of his imaginary Hannibal as the stag comes closer.

"You are all right, Will."

"I know. I won't let it hurt you." The stag kneels, baring its gnarled antlers so they brush against Will's chest and catch on the fabric. He still isn't afraid of the stag. What he feels is closer to rage.

He grabs the antlers in his hands and shoves the beast as much as he can. It makes a disgruntled noise and looks ready to attack but stops when Hannibal touches Will's shoulder. He shivers and steps aside, not knowing why until Hannibal extends a hand to the stag and breaks off the two thickest tines in his hands. They twist into daggers in his hands. He gives one to Will.

"Like this, Will?" The stag cries, and again, it is jubilant.

He shoots up in bed to the sound of the alarm ringing. His phone bounces off the bed and lands with a clatter on the floor. He accidentally pushes the clock off the side table before managing to shut it off. It's five thirty. He can't believe Jack didn't try to wake him sooner. They had to have another body by now.

He leans over the other side of the bed for his phone and checks the call log. According to his cell phone, the call ended at 10:19 PM. He wonders how much of his dream was a dream and not guided meditation. *How much of it did he talk me through?*

He sees he has a text message waiting for him. It's from Hannibal.

>>You mentioned something about jeans and a t-shirt before you became unintelligible. I hope I did not disconnect the call too soon, and I hope you are rested and well.
H

Will chokes back the mortified sound he makes and replies with a short text after deciding Hannibal will already be awake by now.

>>I slept okay. Thanks it really worked

My very own Casual Friday kink. Who knew?

He stumbles into the shower and works quickly with the soap and shampoo, fully expecting Jack to come barreling in any minute with a crime scene for him. He towels off and gets dressed before taking up his jacket and phone. Before he slips it in his pocket he notices another text message alert. Hannibal wrote him back.

>>Out of curiosity, who was it you were referring to? In the jeans and t-shirt?

Gods. Will shakes his head, though a grin spreads across his face. He considers writing, *wouldn't you like to know?* But that would be childish and overtly flirtatious, and Hannibal would probably counter with some deadpan response like, *I only ask questions I want to know the answers to, Will.*

>>It was you. It wouldn't have been a big deal if it had been anyone else.

He nearly drops his phone the second he sends it, instantly regretting his spontaneous boldness. He swears several times under his breath before leaving the room and going down to three. There are a few busy techs wandering around making themselves useful. He doesn't see anyone he recognizes. Jack and the team are off somewhere, maybe scouting the city for miscellaneous corpses they can take Will to.

"Hey, fed." Will doesn't perk up right away, but then he looks around and turns.

"Casson," Will nods his head.

"That's Officer to you, shit head."

"Sorry." Will mumbles, picking up a file to skim through. It's almost a joke the way he says is. He's not sorry at all.

Casson knows he isn't. He's not stupid.

He probably went into law enforcement in the first place because he's great for reading people, has a good sense of when they're lying and when they're innocent. He's looking at Will right now like he's as good, or as bad, really, as the killer they're hunting, and Will doesn't really know how to feel about that. Maybe he should be offended, but he'd rather have Casson look at him like a criminal than an easy target to push around.

"Was there something you wanted, *Officer Jimmy Galen Casson?*" The guy flushes at hearing his full name.

"You think we need you to solve this case? We'll catch this girl without you, you meandering piece of—"

"Hey, fellas." Another local cop. His hands are raised in a calming gesture. Will feels mildly provoked by it. "That Crawford guy said not to make waves. Maybe we'd better listen? I don't want to get kicked off the case because two guys can't get along for a few days." Casson sneers at the guy. Will has half a mind to shove one of them just for the hell of it—he has half a mind to. He knows he needs to walk away. Casson's starting to get to him in a way that he really does not need right now.

He turns to leave the room. His phone buzzes once in his pocket, and he checks it as he's making his way down the hall. It's Jack, which makes him feel guilty for expecting a social call in the middle of an investigation.

He says they have a crime scene, thank God. Not that he's thankful someone else is dead, but it was inevitable really, and he can't stand to sit on his hands anymore. Jack's message says to meet him in the lobby in five, or he's kicking the door to his room in.

Will makes it down in three, and he isn't even winded.

"Meet Isaiah Howard." Jack says in lieu of a greeting, handing Will his cell phone. The purpled face has been all but pummeled in. "The morning janitor found him on the basketball court at South Williamsport Area Junior High School."

"Local cops stayed out?"

"We've got some of our guys guarding the body, just in case they get any ideas."

The drive over takes about half an hour. Jack talks the case a little bit, and Will listens. He checks his phone once. Hannibal hasn't texted him back. It shouldn't drive a wedge of fear into his gut, but it does. He re-reads his last text, forward and idiotic. Jack catches him scrolling through text messages.

"Am I boring you, Will?"

"Not at all, Jack. I just don't see why local PD even needed us here for this."

"Because they needed us here for this, Will."

"On a long enough timeline, they'd find her, Jack. The pissing contest is hardly beneficial to the cause."

His phone buzzes in his pocket, and his fingers twitch to reach for it, but Jack is watching him. They're stopped at a red light. Will slumps back in his seat.

"They would find her, Jack. Without us."

"Is this about that tech from yesterday?"

"Casson."

"This is about that tech from yesterday." Will can practically hear Jack rolling his eyes. "I'm gonna give you some kind advice, Will. Get over it." They pull up against the taped off sidewalk of the closed down high school, and Will seizes the opportunity to walk behind Jack and check his phone.

>>You are a strange man, Will Graham.

He walks into Jack's back and has to wipe the laugh off his face before coughing out an apology. Jack is really too ruffled up to care one way or another. He just purses his lips and gestures at the scene. It's much more elaborate this time. He takes a moment to appreciate the set-up.

"No one's touched it?"

"I poked around a bit. Sorry, Will." Katz shrugs, handing Jack a bagged up sample from the crime scene. It's a completely open space. Will steps around the pool of blood around the victim's legs. She slashed his femoral artery and let him bleed out. It's arguably the thing that killed him, though there are several other deep gashes down his arms and neck. His shirt has been snipped open down the front to reveal straight red lines etched into the flesh of his stomach. They branch out in all directions like the roots and boughs of a tree. It has to mean something. It wasn't meant to kill or even hurt him. *How did Hannibal put it?*

"Were you deliberate with the knife, Will?"

He reaches into his pocket for his phone out of a sense of propriety.

>>People are strange, Dr. Lecter. At a crime scene. Talk later.

He tucks it away in his jacket pocket again and rubs his hands together. It's warmer out today than it was yesterday. "What were you trying to show us?" Will whispers, kneeling down on a dry spot of concrete to closely inspect the body. "Did you even know Isaiah Howard? I bet you didn't."

He didn't mean anything to you, not like the first two. I know what they did to you. I know. I know.

Will closes his eyes. The pendulum swings through the black.

Night falls around Will; the stars and the moon are bright. The stag hasn't come to collect them, and he won't tonight. Not for her.

He looks down, and a curvaceous hunting knife is in his hand. It feels like when he woke up outside his home that one morning, but the air is silent around him, and he doesn't wake up. The blood isn't his this time. The pendulum swings twice before Isaiah Howard is clean again. His shirt is repaired, and his body is propped against the basketball hoop. He's not dead yet. He's tired and saying something, but Will can't hear it. He's probably begging for his life. That never works, not once the killer's face has been seen.

And his girl doesn't hide her face when she gets like this. This is the most beautiful she will ever be. It's as close to godliness as she can become. When she kills this man, she will be like her masters.

Hannibal had told him to assume the mindset of the first two victims. She would assume them as her own, and he would need to do this also. He would do this to see her, finally, the way she was meant to be seen.

Mr. Howard is incapacitated. I drug him here. I'm strong like they were, stronger than they were put together. He can't scream with his vocal folds shredded to hell like they are. I don't want him to fuss. I do this for him because he is mine now, even if it scares him. It won't always frighten him. It will feel good in time. We will feel good in time.

I slash his left leg. I know just what I'm cutting through. It's precious to him, so it'll hurt more. He'll like it more because it hurts. I have to show him the way they showed me.

His face contorts in agony. It's all he can do to show me how much he loves me. He loves me. He loves me.

It starts to fade. His skin is pale, and the blood is coming too fast.

"Hey, fed."

I brought something for him. He wasn't supposed to go like this. He was supposed to stay with me. He was supposed to be with me because I love him, and he loves me.

There's something off about the severed femoral artery. There's something she didn't mean to happen in her brushstrokes with Isaiah Howard, and maybe with the others, too. The master she did love wasn't meant die. *You didn't mean to kill him or to kill Howard, did you? Then why are you out here every night?*

I try to save him, but I'm too late. It went bad. I loved him too much.

"I said, hey, fucking fed."

I mark up his stomach. I do it because I'm ashamed. Because there's something that you aren't seeing but that you need to see. He'll never tell you just like I couldn't.

This is my—

Something solid and oppressive on his shoulder. The other one; the mean one who tried to kill her.

You would've killed me, you pig. You bastard, you want to kill me? I'll kill YOU. You love me, do you? Let me show you love, pig.

Will moves like a snake. He's up and standing before he knows what he's done, and there's blood on Casson's face. He can't stop his feet from stepping forward, his hands from reaching out. An alarm is ringing in his mind. It sets his blood boiling and his bones tingling. It's power, and it's joy.

I could kill him. I could kill him. I could snap his neck.

Because I love him, I could snap his neck and then make it better. There's no way they'd miss me here, all these cops.

I could snap his neck.

But someone else is grabbing at his arms. The one choking Casson won't let up so easily. Her strength is wiry and compact. It flows like pure electricity through his muscles. He feels something give way inside Casson's throat. He thinks he's collapsed his trachea, maybe. He squeezes tighter.

"Will, let him go." *Is that Jack?*

His phone buzzes in his pocket. His fingers loosen just that much out of his inclination to hear from Hannibal again and his body is hauled away from Casson's. He takes some skin under his nails as his hand is torn away. He barely registers Katz holding him by the shoulders. She's strong, too; strong enough to hold him back, though he doesn't fight her. Her hands on him are enough. She's good. She wants to help Will, never tries to hurt him.

"Just what in the *hell* do you think you're doing?" Jack roars, stepping much too close to Will for his comfort, though he stands his ground. He doesn't want to look at Jack, but he does. There are emotions rocketing through him. He taps his fingers against his thigh and can't help his giddy laugh.

"It's like the saying goes, I'm hurting the ones I love." He shrugs exaggeratedly.

"Will, what's the matter with you?" He asks, putting his hand on Will's face to look at his pupils.

"Casson's sweet on me, I think." It makes perfect sense. Hannibal had even suggested something to that effect. *He needs to hurt me to show me he loves me.* He winks playfully at the injured lab tech, thrilling in the shouted curse that earns him. Jack shakes Will, knocking

something loose inside him, making everything sting. He feels his heart rupture in his chest, trying to pound through his sternum. He looks down at the body of Isaiah Howard.

I didn't mean to. I didn't mean to.

His knees give out on him, but Katz has him too tightly to let him fall. She really is strong. She's sturdy, too.

"Did I—I hurt him?" Will whispers, looking again at Casson. There's blood trailing down his chin. It's beautiful, and it makes Will want to die. "I didn't mean to, Jack. I was...I just need him to know that I—It's the only way I know how to show him, Jack." He sobs.

"Who, Casson?" Jack is too flustered to hold onto his anger now. He even looks concerned for Will.

"That guy was asking for it, Jack. He's been poking at Will since yesterday."

"Really? Because it didn't look like Will needed a lot of provocation to turn on him."

"Will, where are you at right now?" Katz's voice swims in his head like a leaf in a pond. *Where are we now, Will?* He blinks a few times, dazed.

"We're at Great Falls Park." He looks around, and it's true. He's back at the Potomac River with Hannibal dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, and his hair is blowing in his face. He does reach out to touch now. No one can stop him from being whoever he wants to be in this place Hannibal helped him to make. There's no one else but the two of them and the stag. It rests at Will's feet, and its antlers are restored. Hannibal's crouched on the ground beside it running a hand through its inky black pelt.

"Will, we're in Williamsport, like Pennsylvania. Remember? Hey, Will. Snap out of it."

"It's nice down here." He sits down next to Hannibal and lets him take one of his hands and push it down along the animal's back. The fur is spiky but soft in its own way, soft like tree bark can be soft. The stag lays its head down and falls asleep, and it really is a magnificent creature.

Will knows he's safe here to do whatever he wants. He reaches forward and kisses Hannibal on the lips, and Hannibal smiles.

"We will stay then." Hannibal says, leaning in to kiss Will again.

Chapter End Notes

"There's been a lot of bullshit about the way I think" taken from *Red Dragon* by the master of all this madness, Thomas Harris.

Little Red Rooster

Chapter Summary

Jack requests Hannibal's help to get Will out of his serial killer funk.

Chapter Notes

Ain't been no peace in the barnyard/Since my little red rooster been gone

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hannibal is reading when the phone rings. His last patient of the day will not be arriving for another forty five minutes, so he takes the call. He half-expects to hear Will on the other line but is instead rewarded with the throaty rumble of Jack Crawford's voice. It is hardly a reward.

"Dr. Lecter," Hannibal waits. "Jack Crawford."

"Hello, Jack. How are you?" The man huffs a frustrated noise of protest on the other line.

"I'm peachy. Will's the one I wanted to talk to you about." This is something more of a reward.

"Go on."

"He hit a bit of a roadblock in the case. It messed him up this time, more than usual." He amends after a thoughtful pause.

"How do you mean." Hannibal set his book down.

"He was doing his thing in the field, getting in the perp's head like he does, when a tech made the mistake of touching him while he was under." He stops somewhat abruptly. Hannibal can hear his reluctance to speak about it even as he pushes down the thrill it gives him to think of Will's too-predictable response.

"And he lashed out at this tech of yours." Hannibal doesn't require any supplementary information about the case or about the incident itself. He knows instinctively how Will must have reacted.

"He went ape shit, pardon my French." Lecter dislikes the phrase—yes, the slur but more the expression. It's hardly inventive. He can think of a few far more explicit, far more vulgar

phrases in the language than the paltry comment Jack made. It’s not good taste to speak about Will in such a way, though his native tongue does offer up an abundance of crude animal imagery Jack may be partial to.

He begins to prattle on more interestingly about a broken nose and a crushed windpipe, which does pique Hannibal’s interest. The extent of the damage paints a lovely picture of exactly what happened. He can imagine what sort of stance Will would have to have been in to deliver such results.

The first blow would have been the broken nose; an elbow, maybe, as Will slung it behind him to get the man out of his personal space since his front would have been originally facing the body. The windpipe would follow immediately after as Will stood to his full height and turned.

With squared shoulders and death in his eyes, he would have stepped closer, or lunged, even, until he could reach out and take the other man's throat in his hands. He would squeeze harder and harder until help arrived to rip him off his victim; a man, in all probability, though Will may not have differentiated had it been otherwise.

"Casson wants to press charges. He's not one of our guys, so I can't do much to change his mind. We've got half our manpower going toward keeping him away from Will right now, and I'm wondering if I shouldn't just let the guy have a swing. It's a mess." Jack grumbles, finally allowing Hannibal a chance to speak.

"There is a figure of speech I have heard about fire. Do you know of it, Jack?" There is a slightly drawn out silence wherein his question, albeit rhetorical, will go unanswered just as Hannibal disregards Jack's side note about letting a vengeful man anywhere near Will in his condition. So far out of his own faculties and basically defenseless, Will would revert back to the woman's state once prodded deeply enough. Hannibal knows already what course of action he would take to snap Will out of the cycle.

Jack sighs, and Hannibal stands to shelf his book, Jasper's *General Psychopathology*. It comes from his personal library hidden amongst the others purely so that Will might one day discover it and ask of its contents. The hardback nestles in comfortably beside its brethren psychiatric tools. He accesses a travel site via his tablet, anticipating the penultimate move in their conversation.

"How is Will?" Hannibal asks lightly.

"He *was* catatonic for a good hour and a half. He was talking crazy, and then he said something about Great Falls Park right before he checked out. It's almost like he got stuck in the woman's mind, though what Great Falls has to do with it I don’t—" Jack falters, realizing his error.

Hannibal's skin pricks at the mention of the park. He wonders if Will is there now and if Hannibal is there with him, a more casually clothed version of himself, that is.

"Will told me he believed your killer to be female." He assures him in a cool voice, delighting in Jack's apparent discombobulation. Will's episode has affected him, left him rattled.

Hannibal regrets he was not there to see the murderous intent descend over Will and dominate his eyes, even if they wouldn't have been completely his in that moment.

Jack sighs, "It's not that I don't trust you." Hannibal smiles at the resigned honesty with which Jack speaks. He does not let it twist into a sneer and must strike any sign of it from his voice before he speaks again.

"I have not been officially consulted on this case. I understand the need for discretion. We are, each of us, professionals, after all." He can almost hear Jack's relief. While toying with the man amuses him, Hannibal opts to set their conversation back on track. "Now, about Will."

"Oh, yes." Jack clears his throat, provoking a stab of anger to twist in Hannibal's chest like a serrated blade to think the man *forgot* about his prized empath, fragile tea cup or no. He would like very much to kill Jack Crawford and eat various parts of him just for the cathartic relief it might provide, but unfortunately, Jack Crawford remains quite the untouchable asset for now.

"Now he hasn't spoken since he came around; isn't doing much of anything, really. I think he went into shock, but Casson didn't touch him. He's not hurt."

No, he wouldn't be, Hannibal thinks. *Not where any of you would see it.*

"Perhaps I should speak with him."

"It's a long way out to Williamsport." Jack says uncertainly, hedging his bets to see if he can get Hannibal to make the trip without needing to be asked. Hannibal will indulge him. He drove an hour to feed Will's dogs. He could certainly sit through a four hour flight to feed Will.

"Would you object to my presence? He may welcome the distraction." He listens to the static crackle as Jack silently, pointlessly, deliberates. It doesn't matter what he decides. As if to underscore that fact, Hannibal books the flight while Jack laboriously contemplates his situation.

"All due respect, Dr. Lecter, but no one's been able to get through to him. Dr. Bloom's been with him all day, and nothing. He's not responding to anyone or anything, not even crime scene photos."

Hannibal considers giving the man a hard time for trying to hand Will off to another psychiatrist for his own convenience, but he would rather get a move on and be done with Jack Crawford for the night. "It is not uncommon practice for victims of post-traumatic stress to completely block out external stimuli. Neither is it a rarity for them to shut down in turn."

He waits for Jack to accept his diagnosis as fact, and it doesn't take long. He thinks Jack probably wants to make the argument that Will is not afflicted with PTSD, but they both know it is a losing position even if Jack truly believes it, which Hannibal is sure he does not.

"So he may just be stuck indefinitely." Jack huffs.

"Even the most sophisticated machine may suffer wear, and Will is but human." Hannibal says evenly, calculatedly. "If you require my assistance, Jack, Will's wellbeing is my first and foremost priority. I can be on a flight to Williamsport in the morning."

"We could really use the extra set of hands getting his feet on the ground. It’s not looking good."

“I will see to him, Jack. Do not despair.” Hannibal says briskly, though he has no intention of setting Will back on solid ground or even back on his feet. He'd had a sturdier foundation in mind; one which Will would respond more positively to, after the initial shock and refusal subsided. He sets the tablet back in his desk drawer.

"There's no need to drop everything, Dr. Lecter. I don't want to rush you." He can hear the tight pinch in Jack's words. Of course he wants to rush Hannibal; wants Hannibal on the first plane out of Baltimore.

The man is grateful but obviously impatient. Hannibal ascertains that Jack called at all because he wanted a quick fix solution. He had been waiting all day for Will to come around, and now he would have to wait all night for Hannibal. It was his own fault he had not taken the proper course of action to begin with. His priority was his time, and because of that, he would now have to lose more of it, and someone else would die as a result. Hannibal does not say this.

It would do better for Jack Crawford to continue to see Hannibal on the level that he sees Will; brilliant, yet subservient; another piece of fine China to brag about.

"Nonsense. I will be there for Will." He enunciates, allowing a tender note to grace Will's name as he says it. If Jack's breathing changes just slightly on the other line, in surprise or in disbelief or in gratitude, it is disfigured and lost to the static.

Hannibal means it, even if it was tailored and manipulated down to the last syllable. He simply cannot pass up the opportunity to re-orient Will in a fertile soil of his choosing, especially not while others plodded uselessly around him trying to break down the barrier he'd found himself trapped behind. No, Hannibal would be the one to do it; Hannibal would be the one to resuscitate Will from what was undoubtedly the equivalent of a horrific nightmare, something placid on the surface but roiling and thundering cataclysmically beneath the stoic exterior.

"Well, if anyone can, it's probably you." Jack says in a softer tone that has Hannibal confused for the few seconds that it crackles through their faulty connection. Then, in his regular gruff fashion: "We're set up at the Genetti Hotel. I can give you directions when you land."

"That will not be necessary." Hannibal seats himself in his desk chair and thumbs his rendition of Wound Man. He's drawn a ghost of a line across the nasal root in a half-semblance of glasses, Will's glasses.

"I'll see you then, Dr. Lecter."

"Goodbye, Jack." He hangs up the phone, casting a mildly mournful last look at his sketch.

It's quite beautiful, even if it is unusual for him to personalize replicated artworks when he can be roused to draw them at all. The eyes are hollow and lightly shaded through with loving strokes of a precisely sharpened lead pencil. The slightly asymmetrical shape of the eyes, true to nature, are Will's; the shadow of pain furrowing the brow is Will's; the lips parted hesitantly in question are Will's.

He sighs silently and sends it through the shredder never to be seen again, though he watches the eyes, growing increasingly terrified as they near the blades. They watch Hannibal, focused and then lost and then finding him again, so like Will when he dares to return Hannibal's gaze.

As he rises to greet his final patient of the day, the thought occurs to him that he could sketch Will's face a thousand times, purely from memory, and send it through the shredder at the end or beginning of each day. He could do it a million times and never grow tired of waiting to see if that look of terror ever transformed into something more monstrous, more brutal; into something that could fight him back.

But, he muses, plastering on a polite smile for Mrs. Dufour, *he would be destroyed regardless.* And who can say whether the beast within Will could be made to rise even once, much less twice?

He would have to tread carefully. Will’s tendency to make him reckless where he has always been painstakingly cautious could undo him if he doesn’t watch himself. His current patient tells him about an affair she is having with a younger man, and he only barely manages to listen. This is part of the problem Will Graham poses to him, as far as occupying space in his mind.

He holds her eyes and makes all the correct gestures with his hands and with his posture. She gives no sign of knowing Hannibal hasn’t been giving her his utmost attention.

She has been carrying on with a younger man who moved from Cleveland to be with her. She paints the likely exaggerated tale of a passionate youth with long, thick hair and a football scholarship to the University of Maryland. She fishes for Hannibal's approval, which he does not give.

After his painfully dull session with Mrs. Dufour, he drives to the market and handpicks a leg of lamb. He watches as the butcher artfully excoriates the cut of meat. The butcher, Guillaume is his name, remembers Hannibal from previous visits and makes small talk that he does not dread right away. Guillaume pegs him for a hunter of big game, and he bows his head in confirmation. When asked what specifically, Hannibal answers bear and bison, occasionally elk.

The man is impressed as he cuts the meat, and Hannibal's mind drifts watching the familiar spectacle. He knows well enough to guess at what he would look like under the knife, stripped of all his flesh. His and Guillaume's dimensions are similar enough that they would probably look identical. He doesn't normally fantasize about killing people who have not offended him beforehand, but the day has found him in a fit of whimsy and anticipation for his time with Will.

He compliments the man and proceeds to check out at the register where he purchases the lamb shanks, fresh stalks of asparagus, red potatoes, mushrooms, and a five year-old Antinori Guado al Tasso. He smiles at the cashier, a moderately attractive redhead with apricot-colored freckles and eyes like peridots.

Her nametag reads Sherry. He asks if it is short for Sharon, and she laughs when she tells him yes, it is.

"Well, Rose of Sharon, actually, but that's kind of a mouthful, huh?" She chuckles. "You've been coming here a long time, right? I've seen you around." Hannibal nods.

"For nearly two years, yes."

"Yeah, I thought so." She smiles, and it lights up her whole face. "I've been here just as long, and we've never talked." She turns to look over her shoulder while she tenders his receipt. Her body is still facing him with one hand held vaguely in his direction. Her posture is excellent. He has an idea of where this could go if he let it.

"You are too busy with your work. You are a very hard worker."

She beams at the praise. A bright blush reddens her fair skin, a tease of her true colors beneath the flesh and sinew. Her smile is sterling and wrinkles her eyes at the corners, adding a delicate softness to her already understated beauty. Hannibal can appreciate it like he can appreciate music and art. Rather than consume her, he would keep her preserved like this, just like this.

"Have a wonderful day, Sir."

"And to you, too, Rose of Sharon." He bows his head at her. He can tell by the hitch in her breathing that she is not addressed by her full name very often. There are a few things he could do with that, a few ways he could use it to seduce her, but he lets her be.

She is a fine human being. He considers gifting her with the head of one of her bovine superiors, so she might take that managerial position she has been gearing up towards and by Hannibal's standards, definitely deserves.

As he leaves the market, the picture of her lovely eyes stays with him. He feels protective over her at the thought of death draining the melanin from the green and rendering her tragically mundane. At that, he decides she must be better cared for.

She is self-sufficient. It would be an insult to take that away from her. He resolves to execute one of her pigheaded managers, Yusuf or Gloria, and pave the way for her promotion. He had run into them on occasion. They were not especially suited for their line of work. He thinks of ways to honor Rose of Sharon with either of their deaths, perhaps by eating their eyes or ornately arranging them to stare at Will and Jack Crawford from some unnatural angle and location.

Should he decide to follow through with this plan, it would be Yusuf, who once suggested to an elderly man that he get a wheelchair and stop leaving a "snail trail" in his store. Funny to

think he hadn’t killed the putrid man yet.

He thinks he’ll rip him open straight down the middle so his innards spill out but for the ones he collects for later. While he still breathed, he would pluck his eyes out of their sockets, leaving them to dangle by the optic nerve. He’d tip his head forward so his chin rests against his chest and the eyes hang down like uncut gemstones. He could arrange them like primitive necklaces.

He ruminates on whether it would be too obvious a kill for the Chesapeake Ripper. It might not be identified immediately as his, though Will would know in time. Hannibal thrills in that. He is pleased, uncharacteristically, that someone would recognize more than just his brushstrokes in the details, in the *design,* as Will is prone to saying.

Will *saw* him, saw the artistry and the craft with which he dispatched his victims. That victory would hold long enough to satisfy Hannibal, long enough to cement Will's connection with him. Jack Crawford did not set the bar very high when it came to winning his victories from Will. He only had to have patience and listen and remember. And he couldn’t forget anything about Will so long as there was a chance he might win even sweeter victories in days to come.

The greatest one yet came in the form of an imaginary paradise modeled after Great Falls Park. The spoils came in the form of whispered words given halfway from sleep but halfway from a conscious mind determined to engage Hannibal in conversation.

He had been happy to see Hannibal there with him; he had sought him out. He had tried to protect him from the monster of his mind, from the stag, though he hadn’t called it by name. Hannibal deduced as much from the little things he could discern from Will’s mumbling. He had fallen asleep after mentioning the jeans and t-shirt, which Hannibal would have to look into later, but he had continued to carry on in their dialog where they were eventually confronted by the stag.

He meant to protect him but found Hannibal fully capable of protecting himself. Hannibal would like to know what Will thought of that; if it was a badge of honor or a strike against him.

There is something more to the stag he can use when he sees Will tomorrow, but he has no concrete plans. It is a dream, recurring and powerful, that Will has, but whether it symbolizes some terrible secret or fear of Will's, Hannibal cannot say just yet. Will said revealing things about the creature in his office that day when he slipped under that Hannibal had thought much about.

Will didn't seem to remember having said anything upon coming to, which Hannibal declared to be quite the tragedy. His words had landed precariously near to Hannibal's heart, close enough that he wondered for a moment who Will was channeling.

"You aren't ready for me yet, but you will be." Hannibal looks up, amply surprised at the low rumble of Will's voice that doesn't entirely belong to him. It is too soft to be considered a growl and too loud for a purr. Hannibal watches Will, his hands still over the stitches but don't move away.

"You'll be ready for me soon. You want to be ready for me." Will's eyes are at half-mast. They see nothing. "You need me."

It is a peculiar thing to be happening out of the blue like this, though Hannibal had long expected to witness something like it. Ever since he detected the trace of illness on Will that day, he's been waiting for the problem to manifest in progressively invasive ways. He has been waiting for this lapse in Will's control.

"You can never go back. You were made for this."

Will said he wasn't working on a case. Had he lied? Into whose mind had he needed access? The only outside entity they had discussed was—

"Can't you see?" The stag? Yes, it has to be the stag. Will is analyzing the monster he created in his dreams. There are plenty of psychological angles to play that from, but Hannibal merely watches for what Will will say next. "Don't you see me?" Will's mouth screws up tight and his eyes wrench shut.

"Look at me." Hannibal does. The pain etched into the command is a hurricane that sweeps under Hannibal's skin and through his bones in a way that only beautiful music really can. The effect it has on him is awe-inspiring. A chill runs through his body. He wonders if Will could make him feel that way again, if he could do it on purpose.

"I know you see me."

"I wonder if you see yourself, Will." Hannibal whispers, the words just faintly taking on traces of his voice. Will's eye brows furrow, but his mouth and eye lids relax. He begins to come back into himself, and in a louder voice, Hannibal says, "Your stag is an impressive creature." He firmly believes it must be in order to captivate Will in this way. He is breathless with it, with the animal's phantasmagoric power. Hannibal wishes to know what it represents to Will. It will take time that he is all too willing to give. "He is showing off for you."

It was a fantastic sight to behold. Hannibal wonders what Will's mind is trying to tell him with the stag. He wonders if there is any way to use it for his benefit, his or Will's.

He arrives at his home some time later with the groceries, and the house is quiet and dark. He turns on the lights in the kitchen but leaves them off where he wanders through the rest of the rooms to drop off various items from his day. His evening is to be filled with food; food to be cooked for his dinner tonight and food he will prepare for Will for tomorrow.

In the kitchen, he seasons the lamb shank with black pepper and salt while the oil begins to smoke in the pot. He adds peppercorns, bay leaves, and the red wine and stands back as the smell of burning flesh takes on the earthier aroma of herbs spilling forth and sluicing together.

There is tenderloin in the freezer Hannibal will make for Will, despite the occasion calling for a fresher cut of meat. While the lamb does bring its own significance to the table, Hannibal prefers to serve Will flesh that he himself has shorn from bone, meat that he has brought to culinary perfection with his hands and no one else's.

He braises the lamb over potatoes and parano carrots and eats in silence, wondering in what state of mind Will currently finds himself. There is a chance he will wake in the morning at full power, unhindered by the crippling weight of his empathy, but Hannibal plans to make the trip regardless. Whether or not Will expressly requires his psychiatric assistance, as mandated by Jack, he will need Hannibal in whatever context he can provide, as a friend or as a therapist. Although a phone call would suffice in the event of his recovery, Hannibal prefers a more hands-on approach when it comes to Will Graham.

The circumstances are in his favor. Will has had a visibly traumatic experience and needs a head space separate from his own wherein he can be safe, understood, and comforted. He needs his paddle.

Hannibal has already taken great precautions to establish himself as a sturdy handhold for Will when he loses himself and when the world loses him. To say he was waiting for the opportune moment to take things that one step further would be a bitter understatement. He was starved for it, vibrating finely with anticipation and excitement. Will is the fruit Hannibal's fingers have brushed from time to time that he will finally partake of, the water to quench his thirst. At long last Tantalus will feast.

He clears the table and washes the dishes. He is careful to avoid spilling water or missing any leftover residue from the food. He sets two portions of cubed tenderloin aside for Will and one for himself to be eaten the following day.

It is late in the evening by the time he brings the potatoes, honey, and lime to a simmer and stirs in two tablespoons of ketchup. The smells of zucchini and apples waft into the air and intertwine with the previous scent of lamb and garlic, creating a strange medley of aromas in the kitchen.

He sets the food in ceramic containers on the counter, washes the pan, and leaves it to cool while he swiftly retreats to prepare a suitcase for the flight in the morning. He packs select toiletries and a few changes of clothes to last the remainder of the week, leaving a space for the container of tenderloin.

After some time has passed, he secures their meal in the refrigerator and retires to his bedroom for the night. He sets his clock to wake him in a few hours so he has enough time to reach the airport ahead of his flight and then lays back to scavenge some sleep. In the morning he will fly out to Williamsport, and sometime in the afternoon he will find Will broken and striking in his brokenness in some upscale hotel room. He will find Will there, and he will heal him through the best means he can conceive of.

Chapter End Notes

Lamb Shanks Braised in Red Wine
http://www.cooksrecipes.com/lamb/lamb_shanks_braised_in_red_wine_recipe.html

Filet de Porc aux Courgettes (substitute pork loin for people loin)
http://www.keyingredient.com/recipes/289232/filet-de-porc-aux-courgettes-aux-pommes-et-a-la-sauce-aigre-douce/

Antinori Guado al Tasso, 2008
http://www.antinori.it/it/26-generazioni/guado-al-tasso/guado-al-tasso-2008

Original lyrics for Little Red Rooster by Howlin' Wolf
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And also, the support for this story has been fantastic. You all are just magnificent people. I appreciate the love, and thank you for taking part in my craziness. =]

L'America

Chapter Summary

Hannibal uses an unconventional (unethical) approach to treat Will, though it’s not quite what it seems.

Chapter Notes

You know the rain man's comin' to town/Change the weather, change your luck/And then he'll teach you how to/Find yourself

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He is met with some hesitation. Some younger men in FBI jackets cast furtive sidelong glances his way when he walks into the makeshift FBI Headquarters set up in the imperiously extravagant hotel. He bares his teeth, concealing the malice with a congenial smile. The taller of the two shies away: strong survival instincts. The shorter gawks stupidly: poor survival instincts.

Well, there is no accounting for taste. Jack Crawford has Will, and most days that is probably enough; except in certain scenarios, such as the one Jack encounters now. Will has been pushed too far, in all likelihood to his breaking point, and still, no one can find the proper way to reset him. It must be so frustrating for Jack, seeing his fine China chipped around the smooth edges. He should have known better, really. Will may be damaged, but he is nothing less than what he was before. A mongoose doesn’t play dead when it’s wounded; it bites.

Once Hannibal has found his room and organized his personal effects to his liking, Jack wastes no time in taking him to Will where he is waiting just up the hall. When they enter, Alana Bloom is sitting beside him on the bed. A white hot shock of anger courses through him, possessive, volatile, and unacceptable this near to the surface.

"Hannibal," She stands to shake his hand. He bites his cheek through a cordial smile, lets it fall when his eyes land on Will. It is a bit ironic, considering the man's torment brings true mirth to his face where a polite gesture does not.

"He's been like this since yesterday." She says softly as she follows his gaze. A lone wrinkle mars her taut brow.

"I am sorry I was not informed sooner." He lets himself say to no one in particular or maybe to Will since his voice carries a regretful chord of sympathy he does not truly feel. Alana

shoots Jack a chastising look while Hannibal steps closer to Will to check his pulse. It is slightly high but quickens almost imperceptibly beneath Hannibal's touch. He allows his remaining two fingers to brush against the juncture of Will's neck experimentally. The minute drumming in his neck begins to race on contact. He pulls away before his touch can be perceived as anything less than clinical in nature.

"I have been thinking of a way to bring him out of it." Hannibal retrieves a chair from the writing desk in the corner of the room. It is rather nicely furnished and maintained for the FBI's standards. It was chosen, Hannibal assumes, for its close proximity to the police department a stone's throw down the street.

"What are you going to do?" Alana asks, clearly worried, as Hannibal situates the chair directly in front of Will.

He turns to face her and Jack both, making eye contact with each of them as he shrugs out of his suit jacket to fold it neatly and set it on the desk beside the containers filled with tenderloin for when Will returns. He rolls up his sleeves.

"Something that if it works, he will not like for others to know the details." He says shortly but without defensiveness. "I will attempt a kind of immersion therapy to induce shock and hopefully, awareness." Alana moves to object, always the ethical one, but Jack is already stepping outside and holding the door for her to follow. She knows there is no feasible way to stop Hannibal doing what he feels is right for his patient, but she stands her ground a moment longer, giving Will a morose look he can't see or return.

To reassure her, to make her leave, Hannibal says: "Will has his insights into your killer, and I have my insights into Will." *As well as the killer,* goes without saying. Alana drops her gaze, afraid to know more about where exactly Will has disappeared to and dreading the near future when she will know more as the case comes to a close. Hannibal smiles, only just managing to stifle his happiness at the prospect of unraveling Will in order to heal him, justified in his intentions and with Jack's every blessing bestowed upon him.

He is too eager to lock the door once they go but reasons it can be written off as a professional obligation to protect Will's privacy. It is, in fact, about protecting against intrusion. In the same vein with that truth, Hannibal will not be interrupted, under any circumstances.

He makes a slight detour to the kitchenette where he quickly refrigerates the tenderloin and sets the table with the plain white plates he finds in the cupboard. He leaves silverware for them both beside their plates and walks back into the bedroom.

"Forgive me in advance, my dear Will, but this will be quite uncomfortable for you." He sits in the chair at the foot of the bed, knees brushing Will's. The man on the bed does not move or try to speak. Hannibal watches, transfixed, as Will's eyes temper and fill with something akin to fury. He places his fingertips to a sturdy kneecap. The fire in Will's eyes flickers wrathfully, and his jaw tenses. Hannibal can hear his teeth click in his mouth when he gnashes them together.

He wants to fight because he thinks Hannibal will hurt him; seeing through the eyes of a subjugated victim, he thinks Hannibal will bring him pain. Maybe he even knows on some level that Hannibal is here because he cares for him, but that knowledge would only convince him further that he meant to do harm to Will.

"Do you know who I am, Will?" He asks patiently, his voice empty of feeling but warm, the register of a doctor speaking to an ailing patient. He knows Will at least recognizes him. He needs him to put it to words; he needs Will to hear his name from his own mouth. Will says nothing. He holds Hannibal's eyes in a way that gives him no satisfaction as Will is nowhere to be seen anywhere near the surface. He can see only fire, weakly fed with emotion and terror. He can see *her* warping Will from the inside out.

If he were not annoyed with the nature of the mind that swept through Will's defenses and turned him to putty, he would be greatly fascinated and intrigued.

“Do you know who I am, Will?”

“Dr. Lecter.” His eyes widen slightly and then fall shut. “Dr. Lecter?”

"Jack called me here to help you, Will. It would seem you have gotten yourself in a bind. They do not know what to do with you. I am afraid they left the matter with me." His fingers flatten and adhere to the soft turn of flesh around the side of Will's knee. The man's breath stutters, and his eyes fall to track the movement distrustfully. "I would ask you if I have your trust, but I suspect you cannot answer right now."

Will's nostrils flare angrily, equinely. Hannibal watches every twitch and shiver that crosses Will's face or flutters across his shoulders and down his back. He is a coiled spring, a complex machine waiting for the right sequence of command prompts to splinter his coding into a hundred thousand pieces. He is David hidden in miles of ruined, soil-flecked clay waiting for Michelangelo's chisel in Hannibal's careful hands as he probes through the sheerest veil dividing Will from the false consciousness of the intruding mind.

"You told me before, do you remember?" He keeps his voice gentle and maintains his distance, allowing Will to acclimate to their close proximity to each other. "You told me your killer became this way because something happened to her. What was it, Will?"

He shakes his head once, a violent twitch to one side, almost ripping his knee out of Hannibal's hand but for his unshakeable grip. Will's fingers clench into fists at his side where they dig into the mattress, compressing the blanket beneath whitened knuckles. He gasps suddenly, body crumpling in on itself, head ducking down away from Hannibal's gaze. Stabilize the personality at its weakest: this is the first step.

Favoring the result, he leans into Will's space to instill unquestionable dominance in the situation. He does this sooner than he should but receives the desired effect anyway. Will shoves viciously at Hannibal's hands where they cradle the tight muscles in his legs just above the knee. Hannibal keeps calm even as Will takes some of his skin under his nails.

"What was it, Will?" He asks, more forcefully this time. It is not a request but a demand. He leaves no room for Will to escape him or the question. "What happened to her?"

He needs to establish a beacon for Will to lock onto, needs a peripheral safeguard in place so he will not lose him in the event of a mishap. Another failure from Will would throw Jack Crawford into an inelegant rage. He repeats Will's name, continues to refer to him and the killer separately.

"I—" Will gasps, trying to pull away but trapped by Hannibal's iron grip at his wrists. "She —" Hannibal watches the fear flicker through the hatred. It is absolute, murderous, and completely removed from Will, Hannibal is sorry to see. He commits the picture to memory for later when he draws Will again, undergoing trephination or with his skin flayed to reveal plump, delicate organs. *Or as Wound Man,* he concedes.

"Will, what did you tell me before?" He softens his voice. "What happened to your killer?" His eyes refocus, and Will begins to come to, slowly. He stirs to the surface just enough to recount the facts as an observer, still empathetic but no longer victimized by the connection; this is the second step.

"She was—" He swallows convulsively. In a quieter voice, agonized, he says, "They hurt her." His eyes flit to the door and to the bed and to Hannibal's chair, but he avoids looking at Hannibal.

"Did she want them to hurt her, Will?" He hides the warmth that trickles through him at the sight of Will's lucid blue eyes avoiding his. It feels like pride and gratitude, and it feels like love.

"No," He chokes out, arms pricked with chills. Hannibal ignores the urge he has to drag his tongue across the raised flesh. He breathes in and out through his noise, unnoticed. Will weakly tugs at his hands, and Hannibal permits him his freedom. He scrambles further back onto the bed in a charming attempt to put space between them.

"Or yes, at first. But it changed." He mumbles through his hands as he attempts to smother himself with them.

"What was different?" Hannibal asks, though he knows already.

"They took it too far." Will swallows, running a shaking hand through his dampened hair. "It was supposed to be nice, but they tortured her, told her she deserved it. They brainwashed her…" Will stops and looks around as if only just realizing where he is.

"How did I get here? I thought you were in Baltimore." He scrunches his eyes closed, rubbing at his forehead with the back of his hand. He examines it after, and Hannibal wonders what he expected to find there. Blood, maybe; or a hospital bracelet. Could he have expected handcuffs?

"You experienced some trouble yesterday with another agent. You were not yourself." He says carefully, gauging Will's reaction: confusion, dread, terror, resignation. He does not want Will to linger on spilt milk. "Tell me about the men who did this to her." Will picks at the ends of his shirt.

"One of them is mean, practically a textbook sadist. The other one's more remorseful, tried to get the other guy to stop sometimes. She didn’t mean to kill him. Or maybe, I have less of a read on them."

Hannibal nods, and Will watches a point at his chin warily. He is wound too tightly, still poised over a cliff's edge and hanging on by his fingertips. A familiar cloud hovers at the edges of his eyes, a miasma waiting to overtake him the minute his defenses falter a second time. Hannibal knows what he must do to keep him from falling back under.

"Are you hungry, Will?"

"Yes," Will rasps after a moment. He blinks, eyes blindly weaving across Hannibal's face and missing his eyes at every stroke. He is reluctant, but he takes Hannibal's offer to go with him to the small table in the kitchenette.

"I will be just a moment." Hannibal uses the microwave to reheat the food. The kitchenette is without an oven, annoyingly. Will sits at the table, and he stays quiet. He serves Will first and sits across from Will once his plate is layered with food. The table is so small their plates overlap slightly.

He pours a glass of water for Will and one for himself. Will drinks it greedily before noticing the food. He seems to war with himself for a moment over which need he should satisfy first.

"Eat, Will."

He does, slowly at first, like he does not know the best way to go about it. Before too long, he seems to remember his appetite and eats with more gusto. Hannibal tells him to slow down twice before Will finishes both cuts of meat and the accompanying vegetables. Hannibal finishes in time with him so Will has no time to feel awkward for his ravenous display. They sit for a few moments more before Will sighs and slumps in his chair.

"Thank you," He mumbles contentedly. By Hannibal's estimate, Will had been without food or drink for over twenty four hours. He probably had not slept either.

"You are welcome, Will, though I should be the one to thank you." Will's eyes snap up to Hannibal's before he remembers himself and looks away.

"For what?" Hannibal stands and begins to clear the table.

"For allowing me to bring you back." He does not miss the way Will's cheeks pink as he looks down at the floor.

"I didn't really have a say in it." He says, getting to his feet to help with the dishes.

"Drink your water, Will." Hannibal switches Will's empty glass for Hannibal's, untouched and filled to the brim. Will stares at it for a moment, some expression on his face that Hannibal would like to study all day but can't for the sake of discretion and propriety.

Will takes up the glass and sips at it, leaning back against the counter so the sink separates him from Hannibal. He looks as though he wants to say something but keeps it to himself.

Hannibal knows what's lurking in that mind, knows the fear that governs it.

"You are safe here, Will. No one will hurt you." His voice is just loud enough to be heard over the water. Will looks shocked by the sound of it anyway and spills some water down his shirt.

"I might." He mutters into the lip of the glass as he tips his head back and takes a long drink. Hannibal watches his Adam's apple bob up and down as Will swallows. He re-directs his attention to drying the dishes and putting them away. He sets the cleaned ceramic bowl on the counter top.

"Self-harm is highly discouraged, Will." Hannibal chides him as he closes the cupboard door and washes his hands. "I would not condone it."

"I think I need to lie down." Will rubs at his eyes. "I'm tired."

"Very well." Hannibal leads him back to bed with a hand on the small of his back. Will yawns and trips twice over his own feet. Hannibal does not let him fall. Will sits on the long edge of the bed and takes a few deep breaths, his legs pulled up and his elbows resting on his knees. Hannibal stands at the wall. "Would you like for me to check on you in a few hours?"

Will startles out of his trance. Hannibal knows already he cannot leave Will like this. He is not a man to leave his work unfinished.

"I don't know if I can sleep." Will whispers, fingers pulling at his curly, unkempt hair. There is a slow internal dismantlement taking place within Will that Hannibal treasures as he would a thunderstorm or a night at the symphony. “Maybe you could guide me again?”

Hannibal takes a few steps closer to see sweat beaded across Will's forehead. A lone drop runs down the collar of his shirt. Hannibal can smell his fear and confusion, and something else, potent and wholly animal that may be a residual emotion picked up from his serial killer.

“I’m afraid it would not take given your state, Will.”

He touches the back of his hand to Will's slick forehead. He is cool to the touch and clammy. Will's eyes flutter shut when Hannibal touches him, relieved at the warmth in his skin. When he pulls away, they open wide. His pupils dilate and constrict rapidly. Whether they are ushering in the change or fighting it off, there is no way to tell. What Hannibal can see is Will is slowly losing the battle.

“What state am I in, Dr. Lecter?”

“I think you know, or does the answer keep you from looking?”

Will doesn’t reply. It’s just as well. In a few moments or in an hour, he will be swept under again, and Hannibal will eradicate the persistent second mind inhabiting him. He will only need to do it once to show Will that the parasitic psyche setting up shop inside of him is not welcome and that further resistance will not be tolerated. The trespassing mindset is a measly garden snake. Will only needs a helpful push to devour it for good.

"What are you feeling right now, Will?" Hannibal inhales discreetly while Will avoids his eyes. He sucks in a few panicked breaths before he has enough to answer with.

"She's still here, still *touching* everything, making it—*vile.*" Will's lips pull back as he grits his teeth. Hannibal can see the rage rippling through Will's body in waves. The temperature in the room reacts to it. The air is warmer, stuffier. Hannibal can feel it as Will attempts to close himself off from it, squeezing his eyes shut and breathing in and out forcefully through his nose.

Hannibal steps closer, goaded on by the stifling heat emanating from Will. There is definitely more to it than the pheromones Hannibal can detect from Will's sweat. He runs his thumb over the skin beneath his lip, kneading in the scent captured on his hands from when he touched the shaking mess of Will Graham.

It is inherently Will, but it carries something more with it that Hannibal can't entirely place; something he didn't smell on him in his office, something he's never quite smelled before. It's primal, and it burns in his nose. He would do everything in his power to consume it; kill it, eat it, and fuck it, not necessarily in that order.

"Damn it, Casson," Will groans out of nowhere. Hannibal raises an eyebrow at the offensive name.

"What do you remember?"

"It's...sort of hazy. I was looking at the crime scene as, you know..." Hannibal nods, face a composed mask. "And then it's like a wall came down, and she was suffocating me—not *her,* I mean, but her..." He closes his eyes again and keeps them closed. Hannibal can see Will teetering in between coherency and the other thing pulling him under.

"It's everything; what happened to her, what she did to those men. There's fear and hate on every side of it." He sighs tiredly. Hannibal waits a beat, ignoring the image that floats up into his mind of Will's eyes nearing the blades.

"Was there anything else?" He asks gently, eyes trained on Will with a surgical precision. Will gulps down a surprised moan, all the color draining from his face. Hannibal leans forward with interest, burning with curiosity. It was not a pained moan, no. *Far, far from it.*

"I'm okay now," Will says breathlessly and without conviction. "I'm okay, I'm okay." He stands; knees weak, center of gravity perilously thrown off in his delirium. He sways on his feet and hides his face in his hands.

Hannibal takes two steps forward to stand immediately in front of Will. He rests his hands on Will's shoulders and squeezes lightly, revels in the full-body shudder his touch elicits. He lets go in the next instant, and Will heeds his silent command to sit; this is the third step.

He bows his head, reels forward so his hair dusts across the hem of Hannibal's vest. Hannibal snakes his fingers through Will's hair, the sweat-soaked locks coming apart easily. A heady fragrance wafts up, broken free of Will's scalp under Hannibal's ministrations. His nostrils

flare, coaxing the aroma in so it fills him, feeds him. Will groans, digging his fingers into Hannibal's hips.

The smell is desperation, need, humiliation, and scornful consent. It is submission. Hannibal grins, unseen for Will's helpful aversion to eye contact.

"Will," He speaks, a perfect calm in his voice, in his surety. He speaks with authority.

Will snaps his head back away from Hannibal's hand. He blinks a few times, hard, and shakes his head.

"I'm s— I—" He sighs brokenly, scrubbing his hands down his face. His eyes have become murky with the other presence threatening to swallow him up. "I don't know what I'm doing." He mumbles, legs brushing accidentally against the outer edges of Hannibal's knees when he tries to bring them together. Will stiffens, clutches at Hannibal's vest. He is so nearly defeated, but he holds on in spite of the appetite brewing within him and tenting his pants.

Hannibal lets him struggle through it; doesn't move away or speak as Will shivers and makes delicious, licentious noises. He nuzzles against Hannibal's stomach, rubbing his face urgently into the smooth fabric like a greater feline, muscles coiled tightly in anticipatory anxiety. He sighs heavily, breath hot and moist through the vest, the dress shirt, and the undershirt. He mouths at Hannibal's abdomen and whines like an animal stricken with heat.

"You are in a fragile state, Will." Hannibal says carefully, waiting for the tension in Will's shoulders to ease. He does not move away this time. "There are other methods…"

"Hannibal," Will pants, divesting Hannibal quickly of his vest but leaving his shirt on in favor of unbuckling his belt. Hannibal takes his time removing his tie. *"Help me."* The words come out clipped, grunted through clenched teeth.

He scoots back on the bed and drags Hannibal with him, an impressive display of both his strength and need. Hannibal steps out of his shoes, eases his legs in between Will's, and bends down to steal a testing kiss from Will's mouth. He sighs heavily out his nose, raking his hands up Hannibal's back, through his hair, obviously driven by another's influence.

But Hannibal had prepared for that; this was the fourth step.

Chapter End Notes

I feel like I should also say that I do not own Genetti Hotel & Suites, nor am I in any way affiliated with them (Haha! Microsoft Word, otherwise known as my beta, is trying to make me change “I feel” into “I do not feel.” Sassy word processor is sassy).

Been Down So Long

Chapter Summary

> Hannibal shows Will a different side of himself and gets more than he bargained for in return.

Chapter Notes

> *Well, I've been down so very damn long/That it looks like up to me/Yeah, why don't one you people/Come on, and set me free*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He bites Will's upper lip, savoring the harsh gasp before biting the lower lip harder and drawing blood. Will writhes beneath him, head thrown back to offer his throat, compliant and wild with arousal. His plaid blue shirt comes apart down the middle where Hannibal unbuttons and halves the fabric. He runs a warm hand up Will's chest, fingers pressing down hard, dragging over his nipples.

Will moans, and the sound is noticeably feminine before it is choked off in irritation. Will's eyes clear for a split second in time before they fog over once more. Hannibal slips Will's glasses off and deposits them safely on the side table. Will doesn't protest the loss. He only grows more rabid in his assault. Hannibal takes the kiss Will forces to his lips, only mildly agitated at the implication of kissing Will but not kissing Will.

It is someone else nipping urgently down the column of his throat and boldly palming him through his suit pants. Will fumbles with his own belt, but Hannibal halts his hand where it pulls uselessly at the metal clasp. His tumultuous eyes search Hannibal's. Hannibal stares back until he can locate Will in the depths of his fully dilated pupils.

"Stay with me, Will." Hannibal murmurs, waiting for a flicker of recognition to spark in those turbulent eyes that he has come to know by heart. It is there, beneath the crazed beast trying to extinguish all that Will is and expropriate his life.

"Everything will be all right." Hannibal knows he's taking a risk when he slides his hand up Will's chest and wraps his fingers around the trusting expanse of Will's neck. His fingers knead sensually and then tighten around Will's throat, closing off the airway.

Will could react adversely. The killer confined within his psyche could react adversely and take Will, as well as Hannibal, with her. Either of these things could happen, but he holds on,

even as Will begins to thrash beneath him. Their bodies bump together with more friction and a more urgent brand of heat generating in the spaces between.

Will sputters frantically in protest, instant panic dancing in his eyes. Hannibal memorizes it and lets one corner of his mouth curl up into a bestial snarl. It is territorial, and it is a declaration as much as it is a threat.

He lowers the impenetrable dam he keeps in his mind; the one he’s kept since Vladis Grutas, since Mischa.

He drops it and peers into Will's eyes with all that he is, all that he's capable of and all that he has survived through. In spite of the tremors coursing through Will's body, Hannibal can feel the chill creeping slowly down Will's back. It is all laid bare; Hannibal is laid bare, and Will is with him.

Hannibal releases a long exhale slowly as Will's body begins to twitch more feebly under his hand. A sharp pinpoint of recognition flutters across Will's face, and Hannibal knows he understands what has just happened. He releases his hold on Will's life and swoops down to bite savagely into Will's collar bone. The pale flesh turns pink at the suggestion of his teeth, and Will's chest heaves with the effort of regulating his oxygen intake.

There is a moment where Hannibal thinks Will might try to run or incapacitate Hannibal long enough to call for help. Hannibal grips Will's hips tight enough to hurt, a warning. Will does not speak or try to flee. His breathing returns to normal and he does not squirm against Hannibal's body.

He does not flinch or fidget at all. He barely even breathes.

Instead, his fingers dig into Hannibal's shoulder blades, and they do not falter or slip or hesitate. One hand finds the back of Hannibal's head and expertly brings him to eye level without pulling or even minutely disturbing his hair. Hannibal locks eyes with Will, and the man does not blink or look away. The light freezes up at the core of Will's pupils, still blown through with desire but reigned in impossibly, controlled at a level Hannibal has never seen previously in Will's expressive, haunted eyes.

It is because they are his eyes looking back at him.

"This is unexpected." Will says, face alight with an unfettered amusement Hannibal has allowed himself to show Will from time to time. He wonders if it is genuine. The corners of Will's lips twitch into a small smile, offering only the slightest implication of white teeth.

"Really, Will. You must have seen my true colors on some level." This is unexpected. Hannibal adamantly did not plan for this. He meant to extricate the offending psyche by pushing it out with his own, but he did not intend to take the place of said offending psyche. He planned for Will to see into his mind; instead, his mind became Will's.

"I think I must’ve. I find I'm not all that surprised. You're much too composed not to have something dark hidden underneath the cool exterior." Will's eyes narrow in thought, working to locate the imaginary boundaries that divide him from Hannibal, maybe, or checking for

signs of the initial intruder. It turns out the latter is true. "*She* is gone. I suppose that doesn't surprise me either."

Hannibal has just revealed his deepest, darkest secret to Will, but instead of Will, he has come face to face with his own reflection. It is his own doing, of course, but he hadn't anticipated this garish turn of events. Will seemingly concurs. He brushes his fingers objectively along the buttons of Hannibal's shirt, wrinkled for all that he twisted his fingers into it.

He laughs quietly, and Hannibal can see with some scrutiny, that Will is still there, buried deeply beneath the surface after all, interjecting when Hannibal's influence gives him leave. He is pleased to see that even apart from its rightful mind, his psyche possesses good manners.

"I could fool Jack like this. He would never know." Will muses playfully, voice almost musical in chaste flirtation. Will clearly enjoys the joke, sharp gaze flicking measuredly between Hannibal's eyes. Hannibal wonders if Will is at all uncomfortable with this drawn out eye contact.

He drops his gaze finally to analyze the contours and shadows of Hannibal's throat, perhaps wondering what it would be like to return the favor and choke the life out of Hannibal's body. His smile doesn't waver. "He would merely think you gave me something." His words almost bounce out of him, light as air but powerful in their true weight.

"Haven't I?" Hannibal asks with a little amusement. Talking to himself is almost as interesting as talking to Will.

"It was your intention, at least a part of it was. Our girl inflicts pain to show love, so you took that and killed her with it." Will smiles. "You let me think I seduced you so I would let you close enough, and then you…opened the flood gates, I suppose, though I think you enjoyed my groping you more than would be deemed purely professional, doctor." Will is teasing him. He's lifting one eye brow, and his eyes are shining.

A laugh teases at Hannibal's throat, infecting his eyes where his smile reaches them. Will's breath catches in his throat as his eyes rake across Hannibal's face. Hannibal had suspected Will liked his smile, his real one. He wouldn't have put it passed Will to know the difference between it and the illusion.

"Would you enjoy me like this?" Will asks through hooded eyes, leaning his head back gingerly and exposing the purpling bruises in the exact shape of Hannibal's fingers. Hannibal watches Will's eyes as they probe the surface of Hannibal's face for every tell they can find while he has the user's manual in hand.

"I am not a narcissist, Will." Hannibal bends down and peppers the makings of Will's retort with a kiss.

"No, what you are is an artist." He murmurs in reply, voice warming up as he licks along the carotid artery in Hannibal's neck. "I can feel it in the way you look at me, you know. You do so little to hide it. And your hands," Will lays his head back down and turns his face into

Hannibal's arm. He leaves open-mouthed kisses along Hannibal's wrist. He laves Hannibal's palm with his tongue when Hannibal turns it slightly to allow Will room to worship him further. "You have a sculptor's hands." He breathes.

Their bodies still touch along every plane from their aligned chests to where Will's legs have wrapped around Hannibal's waist. His feet arch along Hannibal's backside, brushing softly, teasingly. Hannibal is propped up on his elbows with forearms laid flat on either side of Will's head. He continues to mouth along Hannibal's thumb. Will takes the digit in his mouth when Hannibal runs it along his lower lip. He nibbles at first and then sucks in earnest, closing his eyes against the sensations that reheat the waning fever in his body.

"I wonder if you will feel the same way when you return." Hannibal says, only a little dismayed at the thought of losing this Will, even if he is not technically real. He wants Will to see him for who he is and appreciate his work for all that it is: a tribute and a sacrifice, his life and his legacy.

"I see you." Will says, a trace of uncensored wonder in his voice. He is there, just beneath the surface. "I *know* you." He whispers, eyes widened in awe, appreciative and stunned, Hannibal thinks. He considers moving to let Will sit up as this may not be an appropriate conversation to have lying down, but then, he supposes his sense of propriety is not fooling anyone. Will knows just as well as Hannibal does that this is the pillow talk of his dreams. By extension, Will must also be enjoying it. He decides he quite likes this detour they've taken together. Will's banter with him is as comical as it is seductive.

He tests the muscles in both of Hannibal's upper arms with purposeful fingers. He may be trying to decipher wear from them so he can have a glimpse into precisely where Hannibal has been and what he's capable of. The subtle power and strength behind the firm biceps and the solid glutes give Hannibal away, he knows. Will is too smart to dismiss it as a strict workout regime paired with a healthy diet any longer.

Once the haze clears from Will's mind, he will see that Hannibal's muscles took their shape from many hours on the hunt; from walking and running long distances in rough terrain and from ending lives. He suffers for his art the way an Olympian suffers for his sport. He earned his body with bloodshed.

Will angles his head and presses a kiss to Hannibal's lips. Their lips make a soft wet sound when they part. They kiss several times more, lavishly and indulgently. Warm breath ghosts over Hannibal's chin, smelling vaguely of whiskey. "*Not a narcissist,* he says." Will mumbles fondly into the curve of Hannibal's jaw where it merges with his neck. He kisses along his hairline then takes an ear lobe into his mouth and sucks. All the while, Will makes soft, suggestive sounds Hannibal is meant to hear and react to.

Even recognizing the mechanics of his own seduction being thrown back at him does not counteract its effects. He has been hard in his pants since Will called him an artist, and when Hannibal bears his hips down into Will's pelvis, he can tell that Will's erection has not flagged either.

Will grunts in his ear, a purely animal sound. He rakes a hand across Hannibal's scalp and raises his hips to Hannibal's. The man writhes beneath him and squeezes his legs tightly

around Hannibal's waist. Although he cannot detect any falsehood to Will's movements or physiological responses, he suspects Will does everything specifically to cater to Hannibal's tastes. It is a heavenly manipulation.

He realizes in that instant that Will is simultaneously on both sides of what is happening between them. Because Will sees from both their perspectives, he can feel what Hannibal feels, as Hannibal Lecter, and experience the emotions as they are directed at him, as Will Graham. His affection for Will, his lust for Will's eloquent mind, and his elation at their kindred spirits joined together this way; Will feels it all. He feels emotion as if it is his own, and he feels it as if it is Hannibal's gift to him, freely streamlined straight into his thoughts for this one precious night, never to be repeated.

Even pinned down in his own mind, Will is steadfastly empathetic. Hannibal wishes he could see inside him and witness with his own eyes the two of them entwined in a way he had only dreamed of abstractly. Hannibal longs for that connection with Will, and even as it exists here in its purest form, Hannibal cannot share in it.

That prospect is as lonely as it is gratifying; at least no one else would ever experience it. He only needed Will to feel it. It would be their secret.

"I suspect you are as trapped now as you were before." Hannibal says in a tight voice.

"No, this is better than before." Will smiles, grinding up against Hannibal.

Hannibal curls his fingers around Will's hip at that, tight and merciless like a vise. Will's face lights up with pleasure, and in the next instant, he bites hard into Hannibal's throat. Hannibal's skin erupts into horripilation beneath sharp teeth and a feral growl. His arms shake and give out on him, and he all but melts on top of Will, gripping his hair tightly in one hand until Will releases Hannibal's flesh from his teeth. Hannibal gasps to catch his breath and is torn between throttling Will and showering him in kisses. When his mind finds coherency again, he can feel the distinct prickle of blood at the bite mark on his neck.

"I owed you your mark back." Will explains easily, not even affected. Hannibal lifts his head to look at the unnervingly blank expression on the man's face. His lips are parted, and a corner of his mouth lifts up just slightly to show teeth stained red with Hannibal's blood. It is easily the single most beautiful thing in the whole creation of the world that Hannibal has ever laid eyes on.

"Yes, I suppose I understand." Hannibal moves the hand in Will's hair to his throat, brushes a light touch along the marred white skin there. He wants to dive down and tear into Will's throat to match his intensity. He wants to instigate a war of biting with Will that grows exponentially bloodier the lower the bites fall on their hot, sticky bodies. But Will begins squirming beneath him.

Hannibal looks up to see him dazedly searching the ceiling, refusing eye contact. The forgotten blood smeared on his lips is vivid against his fair skin in the half light of the hotel room. He takes his hand away. *It could not have lasted forever.*

"I'm—" Will blinks, stunned. The sharp concentration begins to crumble away from his face in increments. Hannibal untangles Will's limbs from where they are splayed weakly across Hannibal's back and sits up. He brings Will to sit up with him, hands firm but austere on the man's arms.

"What just...Hannibal?" Will's mouth falls open in astonishment. "What in the world did you...We—" His voice breaks, and his bottom lip quivers. Hannibal takes another chance and leans in. He watches with interest as Will's eyes flutter closed just before Hannibal can bring their mouths together. The tremor pauses in the moment their lips touch as if Will's physical memory is seeking out the comfort Hannibal's body provides: this, at long last, is the fifth step.

Then, as is expected, the blanket of calm that has descended upon Will is ripped away, and tension shocks through Will's body before he can begin to kiss back. He turns his head to the side enough to break the kiss, but he continues to breathe Hannibal's breath; continues to brush noses with Hannibal; continues to grope blindly at Hannibal's hopelessly mangled shirtfront, eyes pinched tightly shut. Hannibal licks his lips and tastes the blood on his tongue, sharp and metallic.

Hannibal brings an arm around Will's back and pulls him in close. Will does not fight him, merely lets himself be coaxed into the crook of Hannibal's neck. Wet eye lashes flit restlessly against Hannibal's skin, shaking a few warm drops loose. Hannibal can hear each one splatter against the collar of his shirt. He will need to have his clothes dry cleaned when he gets home, maybe even throw this shirt out. The idea of keeping it as a trophy, though, is a tempting one. It makes Hannibal's mouth water to think of it stained forever with his blood and Will's tears: proof of their union. *True harmony; a pure union.*

Hannibal manages a final subtle intake of Will's scent, more for curiosity than for his obsession with Will's unique scent. The stimulating tinge that had nearly driven Hannibal to take Will shamelessly on the bed, meticulous plans or no, has faded into nothing more than exhaustion. Hannibal still would like to take him, but there is nothing he can do presently to quell his body's craving, so he ignores it for now.

"What is with you smelling me all the time?" Will's voice is wrecked but steadily regaining strength. It does not catch in his throat or harbor the wet promise of tears. Hannibal can hear a fragile desperation in the words like Will is not ready to have a real conversation yet but is trying to encourage himself into having one anyway. Hannibal admires his tenacity.

"You are a remarkable person, Will. I meant it the first time when I said I could not help myself."

"Yeah, I believed you then." Will shivers. He nestles in closer to Hannibal, burying his face in the crumpled shirt. His fingers have settled at Hannibal's sides, pulsating with nervous energy along his ribcage. Will is tense against him, rife with indecision as to whether he should fight or flee. He is ready to run, but he will not. Hannibal can tell he will not. He can tell Will wants to stay.

"You can believe in me now." Hannibal says gently, purposely changing the statement. He brushes his chin along the top of Will's head. Will sighs, hardly a sound escaping alongside

the breath. Hannibal feels it rush down his clavicle where his topmost shirt button has been popped off and exposes the suprasternal notch at the base of his throat.

“I’m such a mess.” He shakes his head against Hannibal’s chest.

“Jack Crawford has brought you into a messy world.”

“The world was messy long before Jack came around,” Will mumbles. “Though I’d just rather not think about him right now if that’s all right with you.”

“Certainly, Will.” *More than all right.*

Will's skin is beginning to feel clammy to the touch, and Hannibal resolves to rectify whatever discomfort Will is feeling before dealing with the elephant in the room they’ve yet to address in words.

He pulls back slightly to close Will's shirt, but Will clings to him, panicked and vulnerable and too raw to be left on his own without an anchor. Hannibal touches Will's chin with two fingers. The touch prompts Will to look up, but his eyes do not track higher than Hannibal's throat where they freeze and catalog the wound.

He raises a hand to his mouth and wipes his fingers across his lips. Most of the blood has dried by now, but a few drops catch on his hand, and he blanches, his body locking up even more rigidly than it was. He looks away.

"I hurt you." Will says more to himself than to Hannibal. Hannibal burns to say, *On the contrary, my dear, sweet Will,* but he allows Will his thoughts.

He appears horrified, but the expressions on his face change as Hannibal watches, engrossed. His disgust becomes disbelief, which after a moment, blossoms into unabashed curiosity. He brings his eyes back to Hannibal's throat. Hannibal savors the way his pupils expand and his lips part with a silent gasp.

Will abruptly leans in, acting quickly as if to beat his fear to the punch, and tentatively takes his tongue across the stinging ridge of Hannibal's broken skin. Hannibal closes his eyes, tilts his head back to allow Will room. A harsh exhale washes down Hannibal's neck, stirring the embers in his gut back to life. Will moans softly, shaping his lips around the bite and sucking lightly until his breathing becomes more erratic. Hannibal pulls back.

"William," Hannibal whispers against the other man's ear. He shudders, clutching onto Hannibal and pinching his skin beneath the abused material. “You need to sleep.”

“But—”

“No, Will.” Hannibal presses him back down into the pillows. “You must rest now.” He presses a kiss to Will’s protesting lips, to reassure him that this shift in their relationship holds. Will leans into it enthusiastically, though there is no hiding his fatigue.

“Will you help me?” He murmurs sleepily. It’s obvious he doesn’t need it, but Hannibal is happy with tonight’s victory. He will let Will have what he wants in turn.

“We are standing on the rock face, together.”

“Abigail, too.” Will adjusts his shoulders against the sheets. He watches Hannibal’s hands where they are Hannibal’s lap. Hannibal reaches forward with his left hand and runs his fingers through Will’s hair. His eyes close, and they stay that way.

“The three of us are on the rock face. The weather is as you like it.”

“Mm, light rain.” His body relaxes into the bed. The worry in his brow fades. Hannibal rubs small circles into Will’s scalp gently with his thumb.

“What do you see around you?”

“The water. It’s the same color as the sky; almost like we’re suspended in between earth and…and heaven.” His voice takes a higher pitch as he speaks around his yawn. He is searching for something; his eyes flicker behind his closed lids. He releases a deep exhale when he finds what he’s looking for. “He’s watching from the trail.”

“Who is, Will?”

“The stag.” The corner of his mouth twitches into a faint smile. It stays there as he begins to drift. Will’s fingers tap drowsily at Hannibal’s hip. “He’s…beautiful, Hannibal.”

Will sleeps, and Hannibal waits. Nothing else comes. He leaves a parting kiss on Will’s forehead, and when he finds himself there, he cannot pull himself away as easily. He kisses Will’s temple, the bump of his cheekbone, the hollow of his cheek, Will’s upper lip. He stops when he feels Will’s lips moving. He thinks at first that Will is kissing him back, but he’s saying something. Hannibal moves his ear to Will’s mouth where the breath puffs out and tickles the sensitive hairs in his ears.

“Abigail likes…too. You look great.” Hannibal smiles, daring to leave Will with a final kiss flush on his bottom lip. He does not stir.

Hannibal stands and pulls the blanket up to Will’s chin. He would have to guide Will in meditation more often. The results have proven to be quite favorable. *It would appear some of the tricks do work on you, Will.* He takes up his jacket and ceramic container and turns out the light when he leaves the room.

Chapter End Notes

Lyrics borrowed by The Doors from Richard Fariña's book *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up To Me*; the title comes from Furry Lewis' "I Will Turn Your Money Green."

You're Lost, Little Girl

Chapter Summary

In which Hannibal plays detective. Everyone is thoroughly impressed, though Alana still manages to give him a hard time.

Chapter Notes

You're lost, little girl/You're lost/Tell me who are you?/I think that you know what to do/Impossible? Yes, but it's true

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Hannibal emerges from Will's hotel room, three hours have passed, and his suit is destroyed. Thankfully, there are no agents posted outside when he leaves Will sleeping like the dead on the other side of the door. Hannibal takes the proverbial walk of shame down the hallway to his room and slinks inside noiselessly and without incident. It does not feel shameful. It feels victorious.

He drops his jacket and vest to the floor, strips off his ruined shirt, and steps out of his pants. He folds and bags each item of clothing, taking great care to separate the dress shirt and tie from the others. That task completed, Hannibal makes for the shower. He stands under blisteringly hot water for five minutes before lessening the temperature and lathering a lightly scented body wash over his sensitive skin.

He is careful to avoid letting the suds seep into Will's bite mark, though he knows he should flush it with soap and water for hygienic reasons. Every time his skin pulls around it, he salivates at the memory of Will's teeth sinking into his throat.

He had been bitten during sex before and once in the midst of committing a particularly gruesome murder. Sometimes his skin did not break, and other times he required stitches after the fact. Will's fell in between the two. It was painful, and it was gorgeous. When Will took his tongue along the coagulation in nervous exploration, it was practically a spiritual experience.

Hannibal could enjoy sex for the typical reasons average people enjoyed it. It was a way to take care of one’s partner, a way to worship, and a way to be devoutly worshipped in return. They have not consummated their union, but they will. Hannibal looks forward to the time when Will’s wits will be about him and he will be able to give and receive fully at the height of his awareness.

They wear the promise of what is to come on their necks like the marks of a mate, and while Hannibal finds that alluring, it is not conducive to the inevitable meeting he will have with Jack Crawford concerning a similarly decorated Will Graham.

In the steamy bathroom, Hannibal towels off and pulls on clean boxer briefs, an ironed pair of navy blue slacks, and a gray dress shirt. He tucks a pale orange tie underneath his collar, and it does nothing to dull the dark red scabbing below his Adam's apple. There is a suck mark in the middle of the wound as well as an unseemly bruise that disappears partially beneath his starched white collar.

He prepared for this as well, though the torn flesh is not something he can hide as easily. Better would be to write it off as another violent outburst on Will's part. Even the eggplant-dark stains of his fingers on Will's neck could be written off as self-defense or violence, from either one of them, in the heat of the moment.

Fully dressed but for his jacket and with his tie undone, Hannibal dabs concealer around the most prominent patches of discoloration but leaves a few in to account for natural bruising that coincides with that type of wound. He does not cover up the suck mark, though he does not need to as the gauze bandage will fully obscure the bite from view. It is more obvious from a distance than a red impression of teeth, but it would be unprofessional to appear in a workplace environment with the marks displayed unapologetically for all to see, despite his desire to do just that.

He ties a double Windsor knot in the paisley tie and combs gel through his drying hair. It is around five in the afternoon when Hannibal finds Jack Crawford on the floor below in a room swarmed with FBI agents. Alana Bloom is hunched over an opened manila folder stapled through with attached field notes and reports. She looks worn out. She has likely been working the whole three hours Hannibal was upstairs with Will. He almost regrets subjecting her to this tedium, but he deems it an adequate punishment for enabling Jack's impatience.

As if sensing he has entered Hannibal's thoughts, Jack Crawford notices him standing in the doorway and waves him in urgently. Hannibal does not miss the way his eyebrows shoot up in surprise when he notices the bandage on his neck. It happens straight away, and several people stop to look him over curiously, concerned but also suspicious.

"He had an episode," Hannibal explains lightly. "As you described to me over the phone, he reacted negatively to touch. I had to sedate him after a time. He is asleep now." It is so nearly the truth, Hannibal quivers finely with salacious amusement. Jack does not ask when he can expect Will on his feet again. His eyes merely flick between the supposed wound and Hannibal's eyes, checking for a sign of dishonesty that does not exist.

"I don't mean to be rude, doctor, but do you mind if I get a look at that?" Hannibal blinks.

"Not at all, Jack." He carefully peels the edge off, making sure the adhesive underside does not stick to itself so it will stay put when he reapplies it to his skin. Jack hisses through his teeth.

"*Will* did that?" Alana asks from the table, wide eyes glued to Hannibal's bared throat. He tucks his chin slightly and presses the bandage back into place. He nods briefly, and Jack

stares at the bandage for a moment, shocked out of his words and humbled by the evidence of Will's violence on Hannibal's neck. Finally, he takes a deep breath and asks Hannibal if he can be persuaded to stay and help with the case. He asks it just like that.

"Could I persuade you to stay and offer some insights?" Hannibal politely acquiesces and takes a seat.

They are looking for a female, a clinical masochist likely abused as a child, with Stockholm syndrome. She was tortured ritualistically for a long period of time, Will said for at least a year if not two or more. Her first known victims were found in highly populated areas of Williamsport six days ago; Will asserted they were her former captors, though no evidence had been found to corroborate his theory. Every night since, she has abducted another seemingly random man from different locations in town. Every morning following, the body is found in a highly frequented area of Williamsport at least twelve blocks away from where the victim was taken.

Her kills become increasingly aggressive with each murder as she becomes increasingly confident in her ability. Only the first two were executed on the same night. Afterward, she never took more than one, and she never left DNA evidence at a scene. All she left were signatures, calling cards, in the flick of a military-grade switchblade and in the angle and force behind a stab wound. The victims were killed with knives but never in the same way. Their bodies were all slashed post-mortem.

Hannibal leafs through the folder Alana gives him. He pretends to miss the way she gawks sympathetically at his neck, assuming incorrectly that Will attacked him. "Not to worry, I have tended to it. With the proper after-care it will not scar." When he meets her eyes, the pitying expression has left her face. She is concerned, but there is no time for it now. He is thankful he does not have to provide her with an excuse not to talk about it.

He focuses his mind on the crime scene photos from last night, pictures himself as if he were killing the man. He would not have, of course. The man was skin and bone, no good cuts of meat to be had from him except his brain and vital organs. "Multiple sclerosis." He murmurs. *Strike that then. Only the vital organs.*

"He's the only one so far to have any kind of pre-existing health condition." Alana says, head in her hands, fingers massaging at her temples. "He's also the only one in his weight class and the third brunet."

"Is there anything to suggest she could be finding qualities in them to match those of her torturers?"

"There are similarities here and there but not enough to draw up a profile we can use." Jack says, staring accusingly at the map of Williamsport strung up with red thread. Hannibal looks at the photos of the slain men; he does not bother with their living portraits. They were not important to their executioner. All she would have seen in them was a punishment to be delivered.

If Will were seeking his help, he would have casually implanted theories in the man's head until Will discovered the answer on his own and left Hannibal looking like an idea board

rather than the idea itself. He did not have that luxury now, and his muscles were sore. It was a rare occurrence when he found himself wanting to rest so early in the day, but the prospect of sleeping off his flight and his afternoon with Will sounds more and more appetizing to him.

He lets some time pass while he stares at the photos splayed before him. Agents shuffle meaningfully around the table, pinning photos to the map tacked up on the bulletin board. Hannibal rearranges the photos, idly at first but then with purpose, looking closer. He catches Alana's eye.

"What is it?"

"The reports say the wounds were random, but this cluster of wounds resembles a pulled figure-of-eight suture." He angles it so Alana can see and lets Jack take it from him for a closer examination. "The initial wound has hardly had time to heal." Hannibal murmurs, scanning through the documents before him. He knows the bulk of what they say already.

"You think our girl stitched him up and then yanked the stitches so we wouldn't know?"

"Will said he believed one of her tormentors was kind to her. If she tried to save him but failed, she could be re-enacting that incident every night with a new victim."

"The ME said there were buried sutures in the last victim, also torn out. If there were others, they didn't make it to the autopsy reports."

"She's stabbing them and then sewing them up." Alana frowns. "When that doesn't save them, she rips them out to hide the fact that she did it at all."

"Okay, what does that tell us about who this girl is? We know now she might have some medical background, but why mark up the bodies afterward if she didn't mean to kill them in the first place and if it wasn't to hide the sutures?" Jack stands and approaches the map of Williamsport on the wall. Alana takes a second look at the bodies of the first victims. Hannibal analyzes the most recent two. The red lines etched into their arms, backs, and faces are geometrical and familiar. The bodies have been turned supine to display their carvings; they are open and telling. They are not random. In fact, Hannibal has seen them before.

"We might be looking for a sailor." Hannibal offers, allowing a note of uncertainty into his voice. "Observe their limbs here, the way she left them." Alana looks. Jack steps around Hannibal's chair to sit on the table beside the splayed photos. He glances at them over his shoulder with a thoughtful expression.

"Where?" Jack mumbles, eyes scanning the photos for information he and his team missed.

"Your killer turned the bodies to display certain parts of them after they were dead." Hannibal checks the report and twists a few more of the photos on the table. "They resemble celestial maps. Note the isosceles triangles here and here, a scalene here. Sailors use them to navigate the seas. If we orient the positions of their bodies based on direction…" He turns another photo, less confidently. *Hook.*

A dark-haired woman peers over his shoulder. "What if we called the directions their bodies faced north? Could be symbolic or something." She turns them the correct way. *Line.*

Hannibal hides his smile with a bemused look up at the woman. "Sorry, Beverly Katz." She says, barely looking at him but more out of distraction with her work than out of rudeness. Hannibal's lips quirk into a small smirk. He finds her refreshing. They have never been formally introduced. He supposes they still haven't.

Jack turns to face the table, spreading his hands so that one of them is planted immediately beside Hannibal on the table. He remains relaxed and attentive in his seat while they scramble for the rest of the reports. *Sinker.*

Jack barks out an order for some of the local police to bring him the list they compiled the night before of other boat owners at Beltzville Manor Marine where Kilpatrick kept a boat in his father's name. They single out the female boat owners and find fourteen.

"Whose job was it to screen the clientele at the damn marina?" Jack bellows.

"Well, Casson was looking." A mousy brunet pipes up over the shuffling of papers. "He only looked at Whitewater Challengers, that rental service in Albrightsville."

"Lewis ought to pull his gun and badge." Jack mutters under his breath. Hannibal watches the slew of local officials for an adverse reaction to the reply. The scruffy officer, ID reading Peter Goodwin, takes a handful of files from another local, ID reading Lane Murdoch.

"None of the women had police records or histories of abuse."

Hannibal watches the techs scramble for more in-depth information about the women. His eyes are on their IDs. The first conclusive data they are able to pull from their search are connections between three of the females and the first two victims, Kilpatrick and Belmont.

"Naomi Whitaker, 35, went to Penn College where Kilpatrick was studying, majored in business." Scruffy Peter Goodwin speaks through the file, muffling his voice. A woman in an FBI jacket takes the other two from him and slaps them down on the table. He watches, chagrined, as she leafs through it quickly and silently.

"We should look at this one," She lifts the file in one hand, still skimming through the other one laid out flat on the table. "Fontaine Preston, 27; studied Health Sciences at Penn College a year behind Kilpatrick."

"Tell me she's got priors." Jack takes the file.

"The mother called the police when Preston assaulted her stepfather with a bat eight years ago; charges were dropped before it ever saw a courtroom." Baccarin drops into a computer chair and types furiously. "If there are other incidents that have been expunged from the public record, Casson would've missed it. I'll need a warrant to look." Jack nods, signaling one of his agents to pick up a phone.

“Call Byron Metcalf in Quantico. Tell him the situation.” The agent makes the call on his cell phone and stalks out to the hallway where there is less noise to talk over. Hannibal’s eyes roam the room, uninterested. He is still searching for the lab tech that doesn’t appear to be present.

He thinks of what the man might look like. Would Casson be blond or brunet, tall or short, lean or fat? Would he taste better cooked with Bordeaux or with Chianti?

“Lewis,” The police chief of Williamsport steps forward when Jack calls him. “I want all your people to call out to Pennsylvania Hospital where she works and see if she’s been in this week. When they say she hasn’t, check the alibi. It’s a long drive out from Center City to Williamsport.” Chief of Police Lewis nods and carries out the order. “Baccarin, I want you to call the marina at Lehighton while we’re waiting on those papers; ask when Preston last made an appearance.” The woman nods and dials the phone beside the monitor.

Hannibal is still looking at the nametags of local police officers. Alana notices his eyes wandering. “Jack mentioned a lab technician yesterday.”

“Lewis made him desk jockey last I heard. Haven’t seen him since Will tuned him up.” She says, only slightly conspiratorially. She is clearly pleased, if apologetically so, that the man has been disciplined for his behavior rather than coddled for his injuries. “Will couldn’t even fend for himself, and the guy kept trying to get at him all day like he had something to prove.”

“Hypermasculinity is a plague.” Hannibal thumbs through the remaining file left before them, that of Isaiah Howard. It was his body that lured Will into his trance; it was his death that paved the way for Will’s entry into Hannibal’s mind. There was still no definitive way to know what Will would say or do when he awoke.

He truly was in a delicate state. He would have questions, and as soon as he could stomach the answers, he would ask Hannibal. He would think about it more closely than would be safe for either of them.

They find, by calling around to the hospital where Fontaine Preston works, that the woman has been absent for two weeks. She gave the excuse of a fishing trip that was supposed to last a week and never returned for work the following Monday, rendering Officer Baccarin’s call to Lehighton highly relevant.

Calls to Preston’s home went unanswered by both hospital personnel and police. The hospital terminated her contract three days after filing a missing person’s report with the Somerset County Police Department. The lead is strong, and the agents running around the room are growing excited with the prospect of catching the killer by nightfall. It is an hour until sundown. They are determined not to let another man die for their inadequacy. Hannibal finds it amusing, like hamsters running on a wheel. Jack tosses down Preston’s file on the table where Hannibal can reach it.

He turns back the cover. Alana angles her head to look at the picture of a smiling blonde with brown eyes. Fontaine Preston has a younger sister and a half-brother from her mother’s second marriage. She graduated from Penn College with honors in 2008 and began working

as an HR assistant at Pennsylvania Hospital the following summer. She was in the running for HR Generalist and most likely would have gotten it. She lived in Connecticut before moving to Williamsport to attend Penn College. She moved to Mantua in the same week that she graduated. Her father is deceased.

Hannibal slides the file to Alana. She flips through the pages. They give very little away about who the woman really is beneath the professional success and her coursework in Health Science. She became a certified EMT-b in her second year at Pennsylvania Hospital. Jack paces about the room like a caged animal.

“How about that alibi, Baccarin?” The tall brunette nods, shouldering the phone.

“The last time she checked in at the docks was three months ago. Belmont was out that day, too.” Her eyes flick to the side as she listens to the voice on the phone. “Jack, they’ve got surveillance of Kilpatrick sailing out with Belmont less than an hour after Preston’s departure.”

Jack gets on the phone himself to argue jurisdiction with the Somerset County Sheriff. After what Hannibal is sure was a tiresome conversation, Jack issues a manhunt on Fontaine Preston.

“Dr. Lecter,” Hannibal gives him his attention. “Will says she won’t run when we find her. What do you think? Are we dealing with a flight risk?”

“I trust Will’s judgment.” Hannibal pushes away the picture of Isaiah Howard’s body. It is funny to see a person become so useful in death. When removed from human emotion and vengeance, murder is a thing like Will’s stag; it is animalistic purity designed to function as a cleansing. “Fontaine Preston is a victim looking for help and a criminal looking for absolution. She will not attempt escape. She needs what you can provide too much.” Jack nods, gesturing at the remaining FBI agents to come forward.

“I want squad cars down at the marina guarding the boats Kilpatrick and Preston used, and I want a patrol on-campus at Penn College. Wilson,” One of the men, young but sporting a bald patch like a yamaka stops in his tracks. “I want an update on that warrant. How much longer now?” The man named Wilson skips out of the room and then barrels back in.

“The judge is signing it now.”

“Baccarin, the records.” She is already typing away at the keyboard. Jack rounds the desk and bends down at the waist to look over her shoulder. He places his hand on the back of her chair, and she leans away from it. He doesn’t step away.

“Not much to go on. Mostly domestic assault charges in the family; only two of the six stuck.”

“Dr. Bloom, Dr. Lecter.” He waves them over from behind the desk. Hannibal waits for Alana to stand and then follows her. “Any idea where a person like this goes to lay low?” Alana ponders for a moment.

“Williamsport isn’t unfamiliar territory. She lived here for four years and probably came back on occasion. I’d say your best bet is a cheap motel near campus. Hannibal?”

“Alana is right. The university is her point of origin, where she met Justin Kilpatrick.”

“Do we know how she met Belmont?” Alana steps in beside Jack to scour the woman’s juvenile records. She does so just long enough to get the gist, and then she steps out from behind the desk.

“Presumably through Kilpatrick.”

“This trip has the marks of an impromptu mission that lasted much longer than she anticipated, and yet she has no difficulty keeping it up night after night.” Hannibal says, closing the file where it lay open on the table. He watches Jack and Alana puzzle through where he is leading them. “She is recently unemployed but not without resources.” Alana catches on first.

“She’s a licensed EMT.” She glances down at the file and then back at Hannibal. “You think she’s working?”

“I think she may have taken up a more permanent residence once she saw that she would not be returning home.”

“An apartment then, by the university.” Hannibal nods once. He hears Baccarin typing.

“There’s a Marian Pembroke in the registry: the sister’s name and social security number.”

“That’s her.” Jack opens his phone, presses a number, and waits until the other party answers. “Metcalf, I’m bringing her in on false identity charges. That’s a felony, so whether she confesses or not, we’ve got her. Baccarin, give me something I can use with the bank statements; anything that’ll give us a residence.” She types, and Jack puts on his jacket. To Metcalf, he says: “In your professional opinion, do we have probable cause to toss it when we find it?”

Hannibal can hear a tinny response from where he stands beside Jack. There is a curse word somewhere in the reply. “Thanks, Byron.” Jack closes the phone. “Baccarin?”

“Jefferson Square Apartments on Washington Boulevard; ten minutes out from Penn College.”

“Let’s move out.” Jack claps a hard hand on Hannibal’s back; the impact sparks through his travel-wearied bones. Noticing his mild wince, Jack suggests Hannibal call it an early night and get some shut-eye. He says they can talk more about Will in the morning, and Hannibal kindly accepts the offer to leave the stuffy, crowded room. Alana smiles at him secretively in praise as Jack marches out of the room with several FBI agents and a few local police officers.

No one accosts Hannibal as he makes his way out. It is seven thirty when he returns to his floor. He makes a stop at Will's room to find the man soundly asleep. His breathing is even,

and he only moves every once in a while to wrinkle his nose or twitch his fingers. When Hannibal is satisfied with Will's dreamless sleep, he leaves the room as silently as he entered it. As he is pulling the door closed and locking up behind him, he catches sight of Alana at the end of the hall. He turns to receive her.

"How is he?" She asks in a hushed tone.

"Still asleep. No bad dreams."

"It's good that Jack called you. He wasn't in good shape. Were you able to get through to him?"

"Yes, after a time, though he attempted to cannibalize me in the process." Hannibal smiles at his joke. Alana does not find it very funny.

"He could have hurt you, Hannibal, badly. You should have been more careful." He bows his head.

"You are not wrong. The immersion therapy was perhaps too much for Will to handle. I considered hypnosis for an alternative, though I did not trust it would be strong enough to reach the desired conclusion." Alana is silent for a few moments, her fierce look of disapproval softening fractionally.

"Is he going to be all right?"

"I believe so, yes." Hannibal nods, stepping around Alana to head for his room. "We did encounter an unfortunate misstep of physical boundaries, as you know. When he bit me, I may have returned his violence—only enough to subdue him. His bruises will be easier to hide than mine." Hannibal feels whimsical when he says it; he loves the idea of sharing with Will in the corporeal. He wants to share more with him; more blood, more bruises, more of Will’s tongue in his mouth.

This would also mean more tattered clothes, though Hannibal is less and less concerned with that the more he thinks about it. They are a meager trade off to make for Will Graham.

Alana looks ready to yell at him when her cell phone beeps in her pocket. She reluctantly pulls it out and reads the text message aloud. It is from Jack. He writes, "Apartment clean. Paramedics confirmed identity. Preston confirmed on-call tonight." Alana sighs. "That was really good work, Hannibal. You probably caught this killer for them."

"It was a collective effort." He says graciously. "And Alana, I do apologize if my methods appall you. I know you think of Will as a friend. I, too, care for him. Please be assured, I have only his best interests at heart." Alana gives him a weak smile.

"I know you do, and your methods do not *appall me.* We just have different ideas of what is best for Will." This is true. Her smile twitches into something happier, something resembling cheer. "You look exhausted, Hannibal. Get some rest tonight, all right?"

"Yes, I will. Good night, Dr. Bloom." Hannibal bows his head, smiling with his eyes.

"Good night, Dr. Lecter." She walks to Will's door, uses her key card to unlock the door, and turns the handle. Before Hannibal makes it to his room, she says, "*You're* my friend, too. I hope you know that."

"I do." Hannibal smiles and waits for Alana to slip inside Will's room before walking the rest of the way to his. He stops outside the door, fingers tapping on the doorknob. He checks the time on his phone. It is eight thirty. Alana will be with Will for the next hour or so, and Hannibal will have plenty of time to leave and return undetected, aided by Jack's excessive manhunt of Fontaine Preston. He continues down the hall and rides the elevator down to the ground floor. The late evening breeze is cool and a welcome reprieve from the refrigerated air of the hotel.

He walks less than a minute before the Williamsport Police Department comes into view. He stands outside and watches as the few officers shuffle about looking busy. Hannibal focuses in one officer, a blond with a square jaw. His head rests in his hands, and he makes no move to pretend to have anything better to do.

Mindful of cameras located all around the façade of the building, Hannibal walks around the back alley where employee vehicles are parked. The spaces are not marked. Only a few cars are left in the lot.

He takes out his phone and dials Fontaine Preston. She answers on the third ring. There is a lot of noise in the background. She has a sultry voice.

"Hello?" She sounds like she has just heard a funny joke. Hannibal wonders if she is out with friends or colleagues before her shift starts. It would run late tonight; Jack Crawford and his agents would be staking out the garage at Divine Providence Hospital, waiting for her. "Hello?"

"Marian Pembroke," He begins. "Or do you prefer your given name, Fontaine Preston?" There is a sharp intake of breath on the other line and then footsteps. A door slams shut behind her, ringing a bell as she goes.

"Who is this?"

"A concerned third party."

"What are you concerned about?" She sounds suspicious now. He has seen enough of her in Will to know just what expression has crossed her face and just what emotion has flickered through her eyes. He has seen her eyes now, too. He knows how the light must catch in the dark, cloudy umber.

"The men you have killed." He waits, and she says nothing, but he can hear her breathing. She is frightened, winded by her fear. "The police are going to find you, Fontaine. All you have left to decide is when."

"If I turn myself in," She is crying. The ring of it is distinctly theatrical. "Then they'll think I did it because I'm evil. But that's not why. It's not why." A car door slams shut. Someone

else begins talking after a moment, and the words are muted. “Family emergency. I’m sorry, just order without me. I have to go home.”

“Are you okay, Mare?”

“I’m fine, Bea. Just go, please!” A car starts. “Why are you telling me this?” Hannibal steps into the black shade of some trees behind the police department’s parking lot.

“Your life is over, Ms. Preston. When they find you, the police will imprison you and never let you out. You will never be able to go back to the hospital, either one of them. Your sister will disown you. No one will believe you were a victim.”

“I was—how do you know that?”

“I know about Reed Belmont and Justin Kilpatrick.” She sobs. Hannibal can just hear the brakes screech. “The judge will not take it into account when sentencing you to prison. You will get life or perhaps the death penalty.”

“What do I do now?” She asks, more to herself than to Hannibal. “Oh, God. What do I do now?”

“Come to the police station. Turn yourself in.” An officer walks into the parking lot, a woman. She gets into her car and starts the engine. “There will be an agent waiting.” Another agent exits the building. The short brunet waves to the woman as she drives off and then gets into his own car. Three cars remain. Lewis will have ordered Casson to stay late. He will have made it clear that he was to leave last. “But you must hurry.”

“He’s waiting for me?” Her tone is compliant, ready to obey instructions, whatever they may be. Her tearful display ceases. She is more like a snake than he initially gave her credit for.

“In the parking lot.” Hannibal steps further into the shadows. A third person comes out and drives away. “His name is James Casson.”

“Waiting just for me?” Her voice carries a familiar edge. It is possessive and adoring. It is what Will’s hands felt like when he was still in her state of mind. It is the way his lips adhered to Hannibal’s when he begged to be owned and devoured and loved; when he longed to love as fully as he could; when he wanted to hurt and be hurt. “James Casson waiting for me in the parking lot; he must really like me.”

An engine dies down on the other side of the street. Hannibal hears it on his earpiece. The car door opens and then slams shut. Another officer walks out of the building, gets into his car, and drives away. He passes Fontaine on the sidewalk on his way out. She smiles and waves in a gesture of goodwill. He flashes his lights in turn.

Hannibal sees her from his place among the shadows, dressed in jeans and a jacket, wearing a scarf and a hat that hides her face. “He’s inside, isn’t he?”

Hannibal can see her lips move in the darkness, can see her approach the one remaining car in the lot and peer inside. She looks at the backdoor of the building and it doesn’t budge

when she tries it. Her voice echoes when she speaks into her phone. “Do I have to wait?”

She spins around, looking for Hannibal in the darkness. Her eyes linger on the trees like she knows. But she does not move to inspect them or look any further.

If she went inside, the whole scene would be captured on camera. Jack Crawford and Chief or Police Lewis, and Will, if he desired, could watch her at work. If Casson hadn’t seen her picture yet, he wouldn’t go for his gun immediately, and she might have time to do irreparable damage. Otherwise, she would only get herself killed or apprehended.

“I would advise you to wait. That way you will surprise him.”

She looks back at the trees and grins and closes her phone. She sets it down on the hood of Casson’s car and steps back into the shadows of the building just beside the door. Ten minutes tick by, and neither Hannibal nor Fontaine disturb the shade that cloaks them. The backdoor finally opens. Casson steps out and walks tiredly to his car. He notices the phone on the hood and stops in his tracks before looking around.

He turns too late to see Fontaine step out of the shadows and bringing the knife down into his back. Hannibal watches the man scream and pull away from the blow. The knife is in Fontaine’s hand when he hits the ground and scrambles for the gun in his holster. By the sound of his sputtering, his lung has been punctured. She follows him down, not worried about the gun or curious to see if he will shoot her. She is quicker than he is anyway, and the blood gushing out of his back is quicker than either of them.

She is saying something to him that Hannibal cannot make out, whispering it soft as if Casson is a spooked horse. She takes his gun out of his trembling hand and taps him on the forehead with it.

“You’d kill me with this, wouldn’t you?” She enunciates, and Hannibal can hear her perfectly now. “You’d kill me like Reed would have killed me. Maybe I’ll kill you, sweet boy, beautiful boy.” She kisses him playfully on the forehead. “Maybe I’ll kill you.” She laughs. “I could, you know. I’m strong enough to kill you if I want to. Do you think I can’t?” She fires the gun next to Casson’s head. Hannibal watches the blood explode out of Casson’s ear.

He screams, loud enough that his voice breaks. His windpipe is sensitive still from when Will choked him. Fontaine notices the anomaly.

“Hurt already?” She sets down the gun, and Casson watches it with his eyes, paying no mind to her fingers that poke unceremoniously at his neck. He winces and wriggles under the press of her knife. The blood pooling around him is growing at a steady rate. “Who else have you *been* with?” She sounds infuriated, sparking a new terror in Casson that Hannibal tracks with his eyes. “*Who else have you been with,* Officer Casson? Slutting around when I’m not here to keep you in line?” She stabs him again, perhaps in his right kidney. He screams.

“I was supposed to love you the most.” She stabs him again. Casson’s throat rattles hoarsely as he tries to scream. She rocks back on her heels to reach for a handbag she set down in in the dark, and Casson’s hand shoots out for the gun she left him with.

She turns at the commotion he makes when he sits up and catches a bullet in the chest and two more before she drops to her knees. Casson shoots her and shoots her and doesn't let up until the gun clicks emptily eight times. He throws it to the side in anguish and nudges her with his toe. She is dead. Hannibal waits for Casson to call it in. He can barely stand, and his injuries may kill him if he waits much longer. Hannibal watches the man vomit into some bushes and then catch his breath. He weeps into his arm.

Perhaps he has never had to shoot anyone before; perhaps he has never been stabbed or nearly killed on the job. Perhaps he will take care to treat others with more respect in the future.

Lesson administered, Hannibal creeps out from behind the trees and weaves in and out of the buildings on his way back to the hotel. He walks for twenty minutes before he hears sirens. He wonders vaguely if Casson has bled out or if he will make it to the hospital. The doorman outside the Genetti greets him warmly. Hannibal slides him a five dollar bill and an easy smile.

He rides up to four and finds his hotel room. It is nine forty five when he shrugs out of his suit jacket and tears the bloodied bandage off his neck before dressing down for bed. He runs his fingers along the jagged ends of the wound, now scabbed over. He considers picking them so the scar never fades away, but it is not the most ideal place to wear Will's mark. He waits as long as he can before re-dressing the mark at his neck.

Finished with that, he slips under the covers in the darkened room. He wonders if Jack and his team will see Casson at the hospital or if they will hear of it in the morning when the body of Fontaine Preston is discovered beside his car.

Fontaine Preston wanted to be found; that was true enough, but she also wanted to have her way as long as she could have it. Will knew. Hannibal is sure he knew: knew there was a victim and a perpetrator within her; a repentant child and a contemptuous killer; Justin Kilpatrick and Reed Belmont. Fontaine Preston killed her masters, so she had to honor them. It was the only dignified way to glorify their deaths: sensationalize what they did. It couldn't be cheapened to just murder. Will knew, but he hadn't been aware. He had only seen her for prey. He forgot to see her as a predator in her own right, which meant everyone else would, too.

It made for a nice evening. Casson sounded lovely begging for his life. If Hannibal listened carefully, it almost sounded like an apology, which was appropriate given that Will might just forgive him now that he's been made to suffer for his actions.

Hannibal will sleep easily with the knowledge that even if Casson lives to tell of the night's events, Fontaine has not. There is no one left to speak of a voice on the phone. Jack would be unable to trace the call. The most they would find out is that it had been place at the police station, and that would tell them next to nothing. The one thing it would tell them is the caller watched Fontaine in her assault on Casson, orchestrated it to a tee.

He could understand why people enjoyed ordering out for dinner. Sometimes it is easier to make a call and wait for one's meal to arrive piping hot and ready. Hannibal likes getting his

hands dirty when the occasion calls for it, but it isn't quite safe to take matters into his own hands when the act could be connected back to him so easily.

No meat had been taken from Casson, and that was a shame, but it was a necessary precaution to take. Fontaine had never removed organs, aside from Kilpatrick's castration.

He would cook better with Bordeaux, Hannibal thinks as he sinks into a sleep. *Verite le Desir, 2008. Garlic prime rib with baked potatoes on the side and angel cake garnished with strawberries for dessert.*

Casson's hair was the color of bread crumbs, the singed color of a baked pastry. Stained by the red juice of the strawberries, the bare color of the very face of the cake would be the same blond as Casson's hair streaked through with blood. It would taste sweeter without frosting. He could feed it to Will with his fingers and smear the red on his lips.

His last waking thought is Will might enjoy that dinner more if Hannibal were wearing faded jeans and an old cotton t-shirt. *"You look great,"* Will had said. Sleep finds him before he can follow the fantasy through.

Chapter End Notes

Byron Metcalf is a character pulled from Harris' *Red Dragon*.

Verite Le Desir 2008
http://www.wine.com/v6/Verite-Le-Desir-2008/wine/120315/detail.aspx

Everyone wanted me to kill Casson, and I thought this would be a fun way to do it without compromising Hannibal or Will too much. Maybe it worked?

Soul Kitchen

Chapter Summary

> Will wakes from his death-like sleep! And goes looking for his Hanny-love. Merry month of--What was it?

Chapter Notes

> *Let me sleep all night in your soul kitchen/Warm my mind near your gentle stove/Turn me out in a while now, baby/Stumblin' in the neon grove*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will rolls over onto his back and opens his eyes in a darkened hotel room. The sheets dressing the bed are dry, and his hair and clothes are, too. He sits up and squints at the blurred red numbers on the clock beside the bed and reaches out blindly for his glasses. He finds them on the side table where he remembers Hannibal left them the day before. He fumbles them onto his face and stares at the numbers uncomprehendingly.

“2:03,” He swings his legs over the side of the bed, and they feel as though they are made of lead. “2:03 PM?” The little red dot beside the three suggests afternoon. “Afternoon.” He stands and hobbles over to the window blotted out with a thick curtain and moves the drapery aside only to stagger back from the window like a vampire.

The sun is on the other side of the building and luckily does not blind him, but it is enough of a shock to wake him up the rest of the way. He leaves the curtains open and walks with his head down and eyes scrunched shut to the bathroom. He relieves his bladder—holy hell does sleeping for almost twenty four hours leave something to be relieved—and walks back into the room less stupefied but still wholeheartedly confused. Jack should have woken him up by now.

Fear drops in his stomach. *Did I get left behind?*

No, check-out was at 11 AM. He had checked when they arrived almost a week ago. They were probably still working the case and opted to leave Will alone to rest.

No, that wasn’t right either. Jack would have called him out hours ago if they were still working on the case.

Hannibal.

Hannibal had told them to leave him alone, that he needed sleep. Jack had probably forced—requested Hannibal's further assistance with the investigation, and Hannibal had stayed to humor him and to make sure no one bothered Will as he slept.

The thought embarrasses him. Hannibal is so together, so composed—*"You're much too composed not to have something dark hidden underneath."*

Did I say that?

He had, but he hadn't. The memory is clear and unbending in his mind, but it's too incredible to be anything more than his wild imagination acting out again. *Isn't it?*

It felt like Hannibal let him in, on purpose. He didn't deny that he had when Will called him out on it. He didn't deny that Will was channeling him. He didn't push Will away when their bodies were touching in the most glorious ways. He held Will closer; he kissed him harder; he made that noise, something in between a shocked rasp and a threatening growl, when Will bit him.

He had that look in his eyes, and he strangled me, Jesus Christ.

The marks on his neck are deep and the color of Sangiovese grapes. He catches sight of them when he walks back into the bathroom and strips off his shirt to take a shower. They're long and thin: impressions of Hannibal's fingers left on his skin as obvious and stark as mud would be smeared into his pale skin. How much worse would Hannibal's neck be?

He can't make himself regret it too much. Looking at them makes the nerve endings on the back of his neck and down his sides tingle. It even tastes sweet in his mouth, oaky and like strawberries; it reminds him of Hannibal's tongue smooth and wet and intentional against his. His face grows warm. He can feel the whorls of his fingerprints. He can feel the room pulsing and breathing around him.

It occurs to him that he might be empathizing with the handprint on his neck when his breath starts to become ragged and loud in the small, quiet room. It's ridiculous to think that he could do that; he'd never done that—not anywhere outside of a crime scene. But he could do that, couldn't he? Theoretically?

He could get into serial killers' minds by looking at the dead they left in their wake, by looking at blood spatters and chalk outlines. He could revive that moment and experience it anew. He could bring back the dead.

He could get back into Hannibal's mind when the man put his hands on Will. If he wanted to, he could.

The shower runs warm under Will's fingers, and he can't believe he's never tried it before. With an imagination like he has, his daily shower should be the best part of every day. He hadn't lied when he told Hannibal his thoughts were not often tasty. Usually when the urge to do this struck him, he was half-hard from some murderous dream or other that horrified him to find stimulation from.

But this is Hannibal. Hannibal is safe; his paddle; a cool stream to still the torrents of Will's empathy. He drops his pants to the floor, and it feels distinctively pornographic. It does nothing to quell his blossoming erection.

He stands under the water, leans his head back so the water drums softly against his throat. In a moment it solidifies, takes on the sturdier texture of Hannibal's teeth nipping at the bruised skin. The rivulets running down his flanks are Hannibal's clothes brushing against Will's body, close and intimate and excruciatingly hot.

He holds his hands where he held Hannibal but then changes his mind, moves them to squeeze at his hips and up his ribcage. A moan leaps from his mouth at the familiar sensation, and for a moment, for just one, he's in bed with Hannibal pinning him down with the solid weight of his body; he's arching his back so his hips lift off to rub groins with Hannibal.

The moment flickers into obscurity, and he staggers for a minute, hand shooting down to his dick. He closes his eyes and focuses. Hannibal hadn't touched him there with his hands.

Leaning back against the shower wall, he holds himself still with one hand and traces the other up from his sternum to his throat. He aligns his fingers with the bruises. He knows where they are; he can feel the heat of them and see Hannibal's hand in his mind's eye, covering him from the suprasternal notch to the ridge of his jaw. His hand fits into place, and he's back in bed with Hannibal again, though the image is unstable. It strengthens when he squeezes. When he gasps at the loss of air, the shower is gone, and Hannibal is staring at him. He's saying, *"I suppose you are as trapped now as you were before."*

"No, this is better than before."

It's much better. He fists himself properly now, no longer just to sustain the heady feeling of so much blood pooled in one part of his body. He pumps his hand a few times, and in his sculpted fantasy, it is Hannibal stroking him off, whispering encouragement into his ear, though it's not dirty talk like Will has ever heard it. He knows it's because it isn't the kind of sensual rambling that usually comes with sex. There's nothing typically sexy about it.

Will realizes he's talking, too, in his fantasy. Hannibal is carrying on a conversation with him. Of course he is. Why not?

"Are you doing that on purpose?"

"Doing what, Will?" Hannibal's lips muffle Will's reply. He doesn't need to repeat himself. They have had this conversation before. "I must be, in order to guide you." Will's hips buck up into Hannibal's touch. His hands scramble to find Hannibal's fly so he can free him and return the favor.

"Where the hell are you?" Hannibal twists away from his searching hands, poignant and graceful in his movements. Hannibal is effortless like a dancer. The controlled roll of his hips drives Will seven kinds of crazy.

"I am here, Will." Hannibal whispers, his hand finding Will's throat and obstructing airflow. Stars speckle his vision. The points of Hannibal's eyes find him in the darkness. When Will

lets go, he finds he doesn't even need to breathe. When he looks at Hannibal, when he touches Hannibal, tastes him and moves with him, his body can't contain all that he's capable of, all that he and Hannibal are capable of. They're more than biology and rules and social codes of conduct. They're more than reason can piece together.

"Oh, there you are."

"You control this world, Will." It's true. He leans up and kisses Hannibal on the mouth, licking into the slick heat to find Hannibal's tongue. His mouth tastes of cloves and honey. It's an imagined taste; Hannibal's mouth tasted more like mint leaves in actuality. The clover honey taste bows to his memory; his tongue burns at the suggestion of spearmint, dulls down into a light peppermint. Hannibal's moan vibrating on the roof of his mouth is like heroin in his veins.

"Where are we now, Will?" His grip around Will's dick tightens. It feels too good to hurt, though it would were he not so aroused, were it anyone else touching him there.

"End of the trail." He pants. His hips are stuttering beneath Hannibal now, desperately grinding up into Hannibal's hand. His arms scrabble at Hannibal's shoulders, digging into the scapula with one hand and counting the vertebrae in his spine with the other. "There's something here." He can only gasp for air now. Every exhale is laced through with a groan. Hannibal is growling into his clavicle demandingly.

"What do you see?"

"It's coming." I'm coming. *Will's nervous system trills at being so close. He needs something. He needs something more.* "Hannibal."

He can feel his own hand furiously working at his aching erection. He can feel reality threatening to spill through, but Hannibal is watching him. His eyes are focused, and they shut out the noise, the muted taps of water hitting the floor and hitting his warm flesh. Only Hannibal exists. Only Hannibal matters.

"You are all right, Will."

"I know. I won't let it hurt you." He's babbling now, surely. There's nothing to be afraid of here. Will wouldn't hurt Hannibal, not on purpose. But Hannibal throws his head back to look up at the ceiling, baring his throat to Will.

And Will's body lights up as if a fire had started within him. He stares at Hannibal's neck, the vulnerable flesh here unmarred by Will's teeth. Hannibal is giving him permission to remedy that.

"Like this, Will?" Hannibal purrs at him.

Will lunges forward and bites down as hard as he can, as if he means to devour Hannibal rather than claim him, rather than sting him a little with his love—and this is love; it can't be anything else. Lust isn't strong enough to do this to Hannibal; to Will, maybe, but not to Hannibal.

His body convulses, and he can't feel the water beating down over his head anymore. He can only feel Hannibal's hands as they hold him steady and run up the length of his body soothingly. After a moment he can feel the blood warm and perfect on his face, like summer rain.

"Mm, light rain. Almost like we're suspended between earth and…"

"And heaven, Will?" Hannibal kisses Will's parted lips.

The bed is crumbling away. The hard shower tiles press up against his knees. The water has begun to run cold down his arms, sticking his hair to his forehead.

"Beautiful, Hannibal."

He blinks, and he's sprawled out on the floor of the shower. He manages to sit up after a while and wipes numbly at the semen coating his stomach and his spent dick, still coming down from its hectic, blood-engorged performance. He shuts off the water and presses his head into the shower wall. He still can't bring himself to his feet. His hands are pruned. It doesn't really tell him how long he's been in here, occupying himself. The cold water tells him a little bit more.

It takes a long time for his body to come back into the same atmosphere as his brain so he can will his limbs to move again. He turns the faucet and watches the drain, perplexed, as a red tint mixes in with the water. He brings his hand to his face and feels a massive indent in the center of his bottom lip where Hannibal broke the skin before. His fingers come away bloody.

He scrubs complimentary shampoo through his hair and rinses it out. He doesn't stand until he needs to wash his lower body, and even then, he needs to lean against the wall for support. If he hadn't just slept for nearly an entire day, he might have still been laid out on the floor. He would have to find a way to thank Hannibal for letting him sleep later, without mentioning the helpful stamina boost it gave him. That could be awkward.

Or not, Will thinks, somewhat optimistically, unrealistically hopeful that Hannibal might be even a little turned on to know about Will's sexcapades in the shower, channeling Hannibal as he masturbated. Even if it weren't a huge invasion of privacy and more than a little creepy to take advantage of his empathy that way, Will still isn't entirely sure how they're supposed to act now.

Obviously, he shouldn't go public with what happened, but if they were to go about things privately, does that mean anything would change, or would nothing change? Would they act as if nothing had changed but still continue whatever it was they were doing?

I'm going to screw this up before it ever gets started. That thought makes Will miserable because it's true. As eloquent and articulate as he knows Hannibal to be, Will is that awkward, that clumsy, and that tactless when it comes to relationships, sexual or otherwise.

Will shuts off the water and stumbles out of the shower. His legs come back to him by the time he gets into the bedroom to find clothes, but they still shake if he moves a certain way or leans too far to one side. He throws on a shirt and some pants before getting his boots and

jacket on. He's about to make for the door when a note catches his attention on the coffee table.

At first glance, he can tell it's not Hannibal's writing but Jack's. He's slightly less interested, but it must be important since Jack wouldn't just text him, so Will takes it up and glosses over it before slowing down and reading it closely. He reads it through twice more.

Will,
Our girl's name was Fontaine Preston; sailed and went to school with Kilpatrick. She's dead.
She found Jimmy Casson alone in the police station last night and cut him up.
He died en route to the hospital where we were waiting for her.
Chief Lewis wants us to attend the funeral service tomorrow.
We'll leave Saturday morning, assuming you aren't still dead to the world.
--Jack

He sits down in the armchair adjacent to the coffee table and crumples the note in his hand. Scribbled along the bottom like an afterthought, Jack wrote: *"At least she won't kill anyone else."*

As if that makes up for the people that died on their watch; as if it's some kind of consolation prize that she had been stopped at all. It isn't a consolation prize. Will knows Jack only added the postscript to ward off any guilty feelings Will might have about Casson because Jack *expects* Will to feel responsible for Casson.

Surprisingly, there aren't many guilty feelings. He didn't like Casson; Casson didn't like him. He's not happy the guy's dead, but he doesn't feel personally responsible. The gravity of the statement shocks and frightens him. He's *disheartened* about what happened to Casson, but he doesn't grieve that the man died because Will couldn't find the woman who killed him.

He did what he could to see *Fontaine Preston,* and he failed. Sometimes that happened. Sometimes he couldn't get there in time. He felt bad about that, but he didn't feel bad about Casson's death. The guy would be commemorated for a hero. It was probably more than he deserved.

He doesn't know all the details yet. That's all it is. When Jack tells him more about what happened, he'll understand, and he'll see. He'll feel what he isn't feeling now.

If anything, he could blame it on the high he's still recuperating from after his earth-shattering orgasm.

The cases have hit Will hard lately, and they hurt him in new ways every time, maybe to the point of causing irreparable psychological damage. More and more it seems like even though he saves lives here and there, it isn't enough. *He* isn't enough.

If he were more, maybe Abigail's mother would have lived; maybe her father would have lived, too. Maybe Buddish would have killed fewer people; maybe he wouldn't have strung himself up like the rest of his angels. Maybe Nicholas Boyle wouldn't have killed that girl just to scare Abigail; maybe he wouldn't have hurt Alana and Hannibal just to get at Abigail. *Maybe, maybe.*

Maybe Casson and Preston both would still be alive.

"Thanks for nothing, Jack." Will mutters, flicking the note into the trash can. It's all he can take to receive false condolences for a job poorly done. He'd been invalid for two days, and in that time, they'd caught their killer, sort of. It makes him feel slightly less pivotal than Jack would have him pressured into believing that he is.

He considers staying in his hotel room and playing the part of a sleeping Will Graham until someone comes to investigate, but that feels like cowardice. If he stays, he'll be sorely tempted to abuse his glimpse into Hannibal's head space again, and twice in one day would be two times too many. He needs to find Hannibal so they can sort things out.

He leaves the room and walks down the hall, curiously eyeing each door, wondering which one is Hannibal's, wondering if he's even in Pennsylvania anymore or if he caught a flight back to Baltimore earlier that morning. He rides down to three. Only a few local cops are shuffling around aimlessly, boxing up files and disassembling ancient computers. They look gloomy and haunted, and Will firmly ignores them. He wants to feel gloomy and haunted for Casson, too, but he doesn't want to feel *their* gloom. Jack had him doing quite enough of that, and for a sum of money at the end of every other week.

He hops back in the elevator and rides down to one. He doesn't really expect to find anyone right away, but Katz, Zeller, and Price are sitting together in the lobby. Zeller and Price are having an animated conversation that Katz is clearly ignoring. She spots Will standing awkwardly to the side when she looks up from the magazine she's reading.

Will catches the title when she sets it down. It's "The American Prospect." He expected something like it.

"He still walks among us!" Katz smiles, and Will feels well enough to return one of his own.

"And he's sporting an impressive display of his BDSM nightlife." Zeller wags his eye brows at Will's neck, which he has made no effort to hide.

"That'd be S&M, more accurately." Price says primly, sparing a polite wave for Will and then a critical expression for Zeller. "B&D refers to Bondage and Discipline; D&S refers to Dominance and Submission. Physical markers of sexual violence, of the consensual variety, fall into the category of S&M only: that's Sadism and Masochism."

"What are you, the kink police?" Price turns on him, scowling at the teasing look on Zeller's face.

"Where did everyone else disappear to?" Will says over Price's politically correct retort. If Katz notices the heat rising up his neck she doesn't comment on it. He's endlessly grateful.

He almost wants to hug her.

“Jack took Chief Lewis to the bar down the street.”

“The, uh, the Bullfrog Brewery.” Katz nods. It’s right across the street from the station, right where Preston died; right where she cornered Casson and murdered him. It seems insensitive not to go somewhere else. He shakes it off. “Dr. Bloom and Dr. Lecter?”

“Bloom took a phone call outside, and I don’t know about Lecter.” Will nods, looking distractedly out the glass doors of the hotel. He thinks about the most polite way to excuse himself. Katz speaks again before he can get the words to come out. “Lecter did that to your neck, didn’t he?”

There’s no disguising the full-on blush that rises to his cheeks at that. She’s walked around him so Zeller and Price can’t see, *thank God,* but the fact that she can see it does nothing to calm him.

“Uh, yeah. I don’t remember much.” He lies through his teeth and averts his gaze. He usually doesn’t look her square in the eye anyway. He hopes it works in his favor and she won’t be able to tell he isn’t being honest with her. He doesn’t want to be dishonest to Katz or to have a track record of being dishonest with her; it’s just that this is way too damn embarrassing, and he doesn’t know how to explain it himself yet.

“From what I hear, you went Dracula on his refined ass.”

The second vampire comparison today. Must be something to it.

“I don’t expect you to tell me anything, but if this sort of thing happens again, you need to give us as much warning as you can. You could have really done some damage to Casson the other day.” She says the cop’s name with some reverence. Because he’s dead, Will thinks bitterly, not because she revered him. “And you could have seriously injured Dr. Lecter, too.” That does scare him a little, that he bit Hannibal hard enough to break the skin and that he hadn’t really even *meant* to. He knew, somehow, that Hannibal wanted him to, but the violence of it surprised him. He thinks it surprised Hannibal, too, though he hadn’t complained or asked Will to stop.

“I don’t really get much more warning than anyone else does.” He says it not unkindly but as directly as he can. There’s no reason to sugarcoat with Beverly. She’s talking with him about this because she wants to talk to him about it, because it’ll be good for her to know as much as she can about it.

“Just don’t get in too deep, Will. We’ve all noticed that it’s been pretty rough on you. Since Buddish—hell, since Hobbs, even…”

“Look, I get it.” And he does. “Our work counts on us getting close but not too close, and sometimes,” He shakes his head. “Sometimes I get closer than would ordinarily be considered safe.” Katz doesn’t look comforted by the admission. She doesn’t look worried either, and he supposes that is a small victory.

“If you need help dealing with it, Will, just…Just talk to someone. Talk to Bloom or to Jack, or I can get you drunk, and we’ll talk about it if you want.” He laughs at that. She’s funny. She really is.

“I’ll do that.” He fully intends to follow through, but it hasn’t worked in the past. He doesn’t tell her about the conversation he and Jack had when they found Buddish dead in that barn. He doesn’t tell her he tried to quit, and he felt too guilty to do it.

His guilt is slowly becoming less of a problem, or so it seems. Maybe he’ll try quitting again.

“I haven’t seen her come back in.” Katz angles her head to the revolving doors. “She should still be out there.” He nods, and realizing she’s giving him an opening to leave, he turns and makes for the doors.

“So does intense facesitting count as S&M?” He hears Zeller say as he’s going. Price snorts at him.

“What, do you think there are spikes down there?”

“Guys, really? We’re in a public place. There are kids.” Katz reprimands them and takes up her magazine. Will bites back his smile. They make an interesting trio; somewhat unlikely yet completely logical.

The air is crisp outside and smells of spearmint and mud. Thick clouds streak through the blue, looking very much like the weather doesn’t know the appropriate way to feel after the death toll the city’s seen. But it’s been cold and rainy all week (from what Will remembers), and it’s probably not indicative of anything. Weather never really is outside of film and literature. *Pathetic fallacy. How apt.*

He catches sight of Alana Bloom leaning against a wall further down the building. She’s looking the other way down the street, holding her cell phone to her ear. When she looks in Will’s direction, she smiles and waves. He waves back and keeps his distance while she continues her conversation.

Williamsport is much busier today. Foot traffic along the street is especially crowded where people have discovered the police tape surrounding the station. They’re relieved and freed from their fear, and the first thought they have is to rubberneck all over what they know to be the final addition to a series of homicides. He wonders if their curiosity is greater because Casson was a cop, because they knew him, or because he took the killer down with him. It’s probably an odd combination of the three.

Alana waves him over when he looks back at her. She's nodding and smiling and saying, “I’ll be back on Saturday. We’ll have our session then, all right? Bye, Abigail.” She hangs up.

“How is she?” Will says, figuring that’s okay since they already greeted each other without words.

“She’s doing better.” Alana looks genuinely happy. The slight chill in the air brings out red wisps of blood in the apples of her cheeks. She looks like Snow White. “She’s dealing with

her issues, one day at a time. I was worried this trip wouldn't be good for her. We missed therapy yesterday." Will nods. "But I think the break might be doing her some good. How are you, Will?" She asks after a moment, gauging his reaction to her question.

"Up and at 'em." He shrugs. "I can hardly complain." He looks down the street where two squad cars are parked on the curb outside the station. Alana follows his eyes.

"It's terrible." She shakes her head. "Jack said she didn't even show up for her shift at the hospital. He thinks one of the paramedics tipped her off."

"How did she even know where to find him?"

"There was an anonymous call to her cell phone right before it happened. We think either someone she worked with called her and talked her into turning herself in, but it went bad, or…"

"Or someone baited her with an isolated target, knowing what would happen."

"It could be anybody; another cop, a civilian."

"People weren't fond of Casson?" He asks with actual interest. She purses her lips, thinking he's being sarcastic. When he doesn't react to it, she drops it in favor of a more careful expression.

"From what I can tell, he was a piece of work. He made problems for a lot of the locals here; a decent cop but not someone you'd want to have a beer with."

"Mean drunk?"

"Recovering alcoholic."

"Oh," Will rocks back on his heels. "So Jack wants us at his funeral?"

"He doesn't have any surviving family; just an ex-wife who may or may not be in attendance. Lewis is pulling out all the stops to make sure everyone who worked the Preston case show up. People think he's a hero, so he needs to think about press coverage." That makes sense.

"What about Hannibal?" *Dr. Lecter, damn it.* Alana doesn't notice the slip. It's just as well; she calls him Hannibal, too.

"He'll be there. He's actually with the funeral director now at Knight-Confer."

"Why wouldn't he be?" He mutters under his breath. Alana gives him a puzzled look. "It never surprises you that he's so…decent?" She smiles, understanding.

"He's been that way as long as I've known him. I think it's because there's no one else to step up for Casson. Letting it fall with the state probably just seems improper or in bad taste, especially since he was a cop, after everything."

"What do you mean?"

“Well, he did take down Fontaine Preston. That merits him a little dignity in death.”

“His face is going to be on t-shirts after this.” Will bites his tongue, knowing he’s got to keep a lid on it.

“The funeral will be a good thing, Will.” Alana touches his arm. “It’ll give you closure.”

“What do *I* need closure for?”

“Casson gave you a hard time while we were here, and you never got to deal with him face-to-face; you’re harboring ill feelings for a dead man because you never got to confront him.” He blinks.

“Did you just psychoanalyze me?” Her face blanches.

“Will—”

“You did. You just psychoanalyzed me.” He chuckles disbelievingly.

“Tell me I’m wrong.” She says stoically, remembering herself after the initial panic passes.

“You’re not.” Will isn’t even mad. It’s easier not to get mad because Alana doesn’t attempt to handle him like a Faberge egg. If he got mad, she would, and he can’t deal with that, not from her.

“So you’ll go to the funeral?” Her voice is soft, but she doesn’t try to soothe him. He likes that best about her.

“Yeah,” He says. He’s not sure if he actually means it, but then he thinks about it. “Is his body at the funeral home right now?” She nods. “You think I could see it before the viewing tomorrow?” Her brow furrows.

“They might still be preparing it, Will. The wake’s not until tomorrow morning.”

He doesn’t care. Even if he can’t see Casson’s body, he might be able to find Hannibal.

“A walk’ll do me good.” He really does need to be up and moving. Sleeping for so long had caused his limbs to go rubbery if he stood in one spot for too long. He can tell Alana agrees that a little exercise would be beneficial to him. She doesn’t quite approve of his going to the funeral home, but he’s going to do it anyway. “I’ll be back later.”

He pulls up a map on his phone and starts to head westward down 4th Street. He doesn’t check to see if she’s following him; just takes it on faith that she knows better than to try it.

He walks for maybe forty minutes before he takes a detour down Blaine Street to pass by the baseball field. There’s a little league game going. He can hear one overbearing dad yelling at the top of his lungs, *“Go, Tanner! Slide home, Tanner! YEAH! That’s my son!”*

Will looks for a companion to place with the ecstatic father and finds him alone. The other parents are leaned away from him on the stands. The boy named Tanner looks to be the

opposite of thrilled. When he sits down on the bench, his friends all rough him up and shout excitedly. He's a natural athlete, and he's popular for a thirteen or fourteen year-old.

"Yeah, good job, Tanner! Atta boy."

That's my son—mine. When he gets it right, he's my son.

"Atta boy." Will mouths to himself as he walks by. His eyes are glued to the back of Tanner's helmet. The boy doesn't rejoice with his friends. When their team earns another homerun, he hardly moves at all.

Hate sports, hate all the eyes. Too much attention. Wanna go home. Dad can watch baseball at home.

"Do you have a child playing today?" A woman stops to ask him. He realizes he's been staring, and he knows how he must look.

"No, I'm—I'm with police. I'm headed to the funeral home."

"Oh, about Jimmy Casson. Terrible thing. It's up that way. You turn right onto Newcomer and then left onto Memorial."

"Thanks." He mumbles, sparing a final glance to the boy named Tanner and a longer one to his father, still booming in the stands. "Uh, hey." He catches the woman's attention again. She's got a toddler in her arms and a family waiting for her by the fence. "That kid, Tanner, do you know his dad?"

"Miguel something…Gomez or Gutierrez?" Will nods, keeps it tucked away in his head for later. "Excuse me. I really have to go. My son's batting soon." He lets her go and continues on the way she instructed him: right at Newcomer, left onto Memorial. He comes upon the funeral home ten minutes later. He stands outside for a minute. He hadn't come up with a plan for what to do once he got here.

Feet first, Graham.

His body listens to his brain and carries him into the building. He walks in, and there's a young man working the front desk. He looks up at Will and smiles kindly.

"Hello." Will looks around. It's tastefully decorated inside. He wonders if Hannibal selected this location. There are several funeral parlors located closer to the hotel where they were staying that Lewis might have picked for their proximity to the police station. The whole set-up is classy and refined.

"From what I hear, you went Dracula on his refined ass." He bites back his smile.

"Can I help you, Sir?"

"I consult with the FBI. My name is Will Graham." The young man nods, recognition and sympathy brimming in his eyes. He can see that they're hazel. Will levers his gaze at the very tops of his high cheekbones. The guy is in his early twenties; probably inherited the job. That

doesn't make him lazy or bad at his job. He's actually excellent at what he does, Will can tell by looking at him.

"I'm so sorry for your loss." Will can feel it. He really is sorry. "Are you looking for Dr. Lecter?" It sounds so strange to hear this stranger speak of Hannibal, even though he's dead-on right. "He's in the back with Mitchel. Shall I tell him you're here?"

"Uh, if you don't mind." Will fumbles awkwardly with his hands in his jacket.

"Or actually," He steps out from behind the desk. His nametag reads Reggie. He's short with muscled arms and large hands. He probably lifts a lot of weights when he's not manning a desk; it's probably why he lifts a lot of weights. That, or it's left over from a time when he did lift weights. "I can take you to him. It's not a private ordeal or anything, and you're both cops." They aren't actually, but he figures Reggie means they have the proper clearance to be allowed wherever they want, which isn't entirely true either. It's close enough that he won't argue. Reggie's taking him to see Hannibal.

"I'm Reggie Vogt, by the way." He shakes Will's hand. "Just follow me." He walks down a short hallway lined with photos of the staff on one side and open windows on the other. They step through a wide doorway into a viewing room that has already been polished and decked out with red, orange, and yellow flower arrangements. The cream colored drapes at the back of the room behind the casket stand are tied plainly with a bleached white ribbon.

The room looks fit for a bridal celebration in the absence of both a casket and a dead body. It will hold its grace when they are added. Hannibal will have made sure of that.

"Mitch, where's the guy?" A wilted man in a gray suit looks up from the row of chairs he's straightening. His eyes are the same hazel color as Reggie's are. He dyed his hair jet black recently, and he's obviously the younger of the two brothers, though he's much taller. He presses his shoulders back when he sees Will, and his improved posture adds at least two inches to his already impressive height.

"Dr. Lecter's in the office taking a call." His voice is softer than Will expected; a gentle giant.

When he approaches Will to shake his hand, he rolls down his sleeves self-consciously to cover the tattoo on his left forearm. Will doesn't look out of respect to Mitchel's privacy, but he caught sight of it when he was moving the chairs; something like a serpent draped around an anchor.

"Mitch Vogt."

"Will Graham."

His hands are large and meaty, too, like his brother's. His grip is firm.

"Pleasure to meet you, Sir. Sorry about Officer Casson. It's a damn shame." Will nods.

"Did you know him?"

"I met him once. He came here to bury his father years ago." He glances at Reggie.

“Lieutenant Colonel James Casson. He was one hell of a guy.” Reggie smiles sentimentally.

“You must have been kids when that happened.”

“Well, yeah. Dad was just an intern here when he passed, but they knew each other from the army.”

“That’s the reason you went into marines?” Will asks, the question pointed at both of them. Reggie shifts uncomfortably from one foot to the other. “You’ve got an anchor on your arm, and you,” Will gestures at Reggie. “You’re the big brother. Your influence would have been more important than anyone else’s.”

“I told you people can tell I’m the big brother, you behemoth.” Reggie grins lovingly at his brother. The bell at the front door rings, and Reggie makes a quick exit after punching his brother in the arm.

“How’d you know he was older?”

“I had a growth spurt, too.” Will explains, shrugging his shoulders. “I’ve been this tall since the eighth grade.” Mitchel nods. Something similar happened to him.

“It hit me at fifteen. God, those are some years I wouldn’t mind forgetting.” He still walks with an awkward gait that the military only partially ironed out. “Reggie enlisted when he turned eighteen. That was…five years ago, Jesus. I went in on my seventeenth birthday. Dad almost didn’t let me, but how could he when he and Reg did the same thing?”

“Will,” He looks up to find Hannibal watching him from the doorway. His face is a mask, but Will thinks he looks a little surprised to see him.

“Hi.” They stare at each other.

“I’ll be in the back room with the body. Just knock if you need anything.” Mitchel scurries off the way his brother went, and a silence falls over the room. *Great, this is clingy. I’m being clingy. No quicker way to make yourself unattractive than to stalk him, Graham. Excellent.*

Hannibal walks into the room. He pulls the one double door closed behind him. Will’s heart hammers in his chest. He shoves in his hands in his back pockets to hide that they’re sweating and shaking.

“You look well.” Hannibal offers, walking around the edge of chairs Will keeps at the backs of his legs.

“Yeah, I feel better. Thanks.” Will scans the flower arrangements at the front of the room as if there are new details he needs to memorize. There are still a dozen flowers; three orange, three red, three yellow, and three pink. The ribbons about the drapes are still white, white. He imagines Casson’s body in a casket atop the empty stand. The warm colors will look nice against his yellow hair. It will look brighter in death if Mitchel doesn’t correct the pallor that'll have set in with death.

“Will,” He turns, startled at Hannibal’s change in proximity. “Did you come here because of what happened last night?”

Because of what happened last night.

“I’m just not really sure what…happened, I guess.”

“Therapy.” *Fuck.*

Shit. Damn it. Fuck.

“Oh.”

“It was unorthodox.” Hannibal nods his head once. “We may have taken it too far.”

“No, really?” Will laughs sardonically. “Because I seem to remember you *strangling* me. I *bit you,* Hannibal. I drew blood.” *Hannibal.*

“That will cease to be a problem within a matter of weeks.” He shrugs, a minute twitch of his shoulders that stretched the suit jacket just so down his biceps. Will remembers testing those arms with his hands. They were solid, strong. His eyes flick down to the discreet bandage at his throat. Will’s mouth goes dry. “Unless that is not the problem you are referring to.”

You know it isn’t, damn you. You know.

“You kissed me.” Word vomit; just a bunch of word vomit. “After it was over, you kissed me. You didn’t have to anymore, but you did.”

“I did.” Hannibal takes two steps closer.

“And before that, we were—” Will knocks two chairs behind him out of place, and he busies himself with fixing it so Mitchel won’t have to. It also helps to have an excuse not to look at Hannibal. He’s adjusted the chair on the right four times when Hannibal lays a hand on Will’s arm. His fingers curl around the inside of his elbow. They feel almost possessive. They feel powerful.

“We were what, Will?”

He felt powerful.

“We were practically having sex.” He says harshly, trying to pull away from Hannibal and to no avail. His grip is tight around Will’s arm.

“But we did not, Will.”

No, we didn’t! What the hell does any of this mean?

“Do you often find yourself subject to homophobic thoughts, Will?”

“What?” Will turns around.

“You are ashamed because of what almost happened between us. I assure you, I would not have tried anything. You were in no condition.”

“I was in no…”

“Have you eaten, Will?”

“I was…*what?*”

“I must speak with Mitchel about the service tomorrow, and then we will go.”

“Wha—Go where?”

“I made reservations at the Peter Herdic House for six. I planned to take Jack or Alana, but here you are. You will be a better companion.” Will sneaks a peek at his watch in spite of himself. It’s already fifteen after five.

“Wait a minute!” Will catches himself with his hands on his hips and crosses his arms over his chest instead. Hannibal looks at him expectantly. “I do not have homophobic thoughts about this.” Hannibal closes the door again. He hopes Reggie didn’t overhear him.

“Speak your mind, Will.” It is a command. He almost certainly doesn’t need to hear Will say it. More than likely, he wants for Will to hear it. Will swallows down his fear, but no words come out.

He takes a deep steadying breath, and then he takes three more. He walks toward Hannibal, confidently at first but then deflating as soon as Hannibal is within arms’ reach. Being so close to Hannibal knocks the wind out of him. His hands tremble when he takes the lapels of Hannibal’s jacket in his hands. He bites his lip, unsure. This was so much easier when it wasn’t really him behind the wheel, when Hannibal had to play along.

“Yes, Will?” Hannibal asks calmly, a damn marble statue with perfectly styled hair and pressed suits and a spotless kitchen and fancy pajamas; Hannibal with the mouth and the tongue and the hands and the hips; Hannibal with the imprint of *Will’s teeth* in his throat. He licks his lips. *Hannibal.*

A knock sounds on the other side of the door, and Will lets go. He spins away from Hannibal when the door opens, and Hannibal doesn’t have a single hair out of place when Mitchel tells him the body is ready to be placed in the viewing room. He spares a glance at Will, not commenting on his disheveled appearance if he notices at all.

“Will you need my assistance moving the casket?” Hannibal offers politely, though they do have somewhere to be, apparently.

“No, Reg and I do it ourselves all the time. Thanks for all your help today, Dr. Lecter.” Hannibal nods his head and shakes Mitchel’s hand. “See you tomorrow, Mr. Graham?”

“Yeah, you will.” They shake hands. Mitchel walks through a side door near the front of the room by the stand. It’s a shortcut to the morgue, probably. Will follows Hannibal out through the double doors and waves to Reggie where he’s sitting at the desk typing with the phone

propped on his shoulder. He winks at Will after Hannibal walks out the door. The clouds have dispersed throughout the sky, but they have darkened considerably. The sky is tinted orange with the sunset. It is vibrant against the slate clouds. Will counts the sunbeams he can see dropping out of the sky like translucent glass hanging down from a chandelier. He sees twelve before his vision starts to spot on him.

“Did you drive?” Hannibal asks, searching the lot for a car. Will is still recovering from Reggie’s wink, trying to figure out what it means. It smells even more like rain now, gritty and moist and warm like packed earth in the woods. The street is wet in places but not enough to suggest that it poured while they were inside the funeral home. It may have drizzled a bit.

“Uh, no, I walked here.” He looks around, as if confused by the statement.

“We will ride together then.” Will gets into the car with Hannibal. It’s a black Nissan Sentra. Not bad for a rental. The inside of the car is warm from being parked in direct sunlight all day. It’s a nice change from the chilled air inside and the cool breeze outside.

“So, the Peter Herdic House?” Will tries to break the silence.

“Not far from here. Incidentally, it is on the way to the hotel.”

“Great.” Will nods, even though he feels like crawling inside of himself and dying.

“You will enjoy it. Their menu is quite diverse.”

Will looks out the window as they pass Bowman Field. It’s a futile search, but he looks anyway, trying to find Tanner in the cluster of red helmets populating the baseball diamond and the congested parking lot. He looks for the father; finds him chatting up a pretty blonde with a very young boy clutching at her side. She cards through his hair with one hand as she talks to the man. His hair is butter blond just like hers.

Miguel, that’s his name, shrugs and waves his hand at a group of boys standing under a massive oak tree. Will watches Tanner come forward, his face void of any expression Will can make out from where they are stopped at a stop sign. Miguel puts his arm around Tanner like they’re best friends. Will wants to punch him.

“Are you all right, Will?”

“Huh?” He faces forward; doesn’t dare to make eye contact with Hannibal. He feels protective over a boy he empathized with for all of two minutes. He’s being ridiculous. “Yeah, fine. Go on.” He blinks, nodding in Hannibal’s general direction without really looking at anything. He wonders if there’s anything at all he can do for Tanner. He wonders if there’s a better reason to intervene than the one he’s given himself.

They make every green light as they continue driving. Bowman Field shrinks in the rearview mirror until they turn finally, and it disappears totally from sight. Will sinks back into his seat.

“Did you play sports as a child?” This is a conversation he does not want to have.

“No.” Will sighs after a moment. “Not outside of gym class.”

“You moved around too much.” Will looks at him. He makes it to Hannibal’s shoulder before he looks straight ahead again.

“Yeah.”

“Did you want to be involved in sports?”

“I kind of liked baseball.” Will admits grudgingly, knowing where Hannibal is going with this series of inquiries into Will’s past. “I liked track, too.” He says defensively. “I never got very far on any one team.”

“Do you still run, Will?”

The question sounds loaded, like there’s something deep and condemning hidden in there, a double meaning that Will doesn’t want to read too much into. *And what do you run from?*

“There’s a trail behind the house I use sometimes. If no one’s on the road at night, I run up and back to the house.” Hannibal seems pleased with the answer. “Do you run, Dr. Lecter?” Using the official title only makes the incidents where he’s called him by first name more obvious. Will swallows around the bad taste it leaves in his mouth.

“Running is good for cardio.” Hannibal nods his head once. “Good for endurance.”

Good for stamina.

“I wanted to say before that—that I slept better than I have in a long time, better than when we did guided meditation even. I slept well that time, too, though.” He blabbers pathetically.

“You were in dire need of rest.” Hannibal parks the car. The lot behind the building is dimly lit and sparsely filled of parked cars. It’s a slow night. Maybe that’s why Hannibal was able to get reservations on such short notice. “All you required of me was time to do so without interruption.”

“I’m grateful is all.” Will goes to open his door. He stops when Hannibal’s hand closes around his wrist. His thumb grazes the pisiform bone just above the ulnar.

“You need not be.” He turns to look at Hannibal’s jaw, his chin. He imagines tasting the skin with his tongue, biting into it with his teeth. He imagines Hannibal moaning—“It is a small peace I would give to you at any opportunity.” His voice is a low rumble. It makes Will’s mouth water.

“I don’t have many people who would do that for me.” He breathes. Hannibal leans in closer so his hair brushes Will’s.

“You have me.” And Will believes him. He believes him, he believes him.

Hannibal's hand moves to the left of Will's and opens the door. The cool air rushes in. The change in temperature shocks and titillates Will's skin. His fingers clutch at Hannibal's sleeve as he removes his hand from Will's space. Hannibal's forehead touches Will's, and Will is gasping. He's sucking in Hannibal's breath. They're close enough he can feel Hannibal's lips curve into a small smile.

And then Hannibal is gone from him. He is stepping out of the vehicle with all the fine fluidity of water trickling down stone. *"We are standing on the rock face, together."*

"Come, Will."

Will stands shakily to his feet and follows Hannibal into what looks like a quaint bed and breakfast. Two women are standing across the street gawking at Will and Hannibal. One of them has a wide smile on her face. They were watching them in the car.

He forces down the heat burning in his ears and face, and then he trudges up the steps to follow Hannibal into the restaurant.

Chapter End Notes

Knight-Confer Funeral Home is a real place; Mitchel and Reggie Vogt are one hundred percent not real people. Unless otherwise noted, most characters are just made up. I seriously hope I don't get shafted for using real places in this fic. Just assume that I own nothing (because really).

The Peter Herdic House and the Bullfrog Brewery are also real things that I absolutely do not own.

The Soft Parade

Chapter Summary

Hannibal treats Will to din-din (Spinach Gnudi is *not* people) and makes out with Will some.

Chapter Notes

Deer woman in a silk dress/Girls with beads around their necks/Kiss the hunter of the green vest/Who has wrestled before/With lions in the night/Out of sight

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They are seated in a quiet area of the dining room by a friendly hostess. The soft lighting creates a pleasant ambiance that permeates the entire restaurant. Will unrolls his silverware and creases the edges with his thumbnail. If Hannibal were any less attuned to Will's nervous behavior by this point in their relationship, he might find it horribly rude. However, he is quite endeared to Will, and he takes his fidgeting as a compliment.

Their server brings Hannibal a glass of water, causing Will to feel unnecessarily embarrassed for ordering an Italian Sangiovese wine. He takes a big gulp straight away and then clears his throat before scanning the menu for an appetizer. Hannibal watches him, amused, as Will stammers a little and declares that he will have the charbroiled oysters. Hannibal orders roasted dates, and their waiter leaves them. For the first time since they have sat down, they are to be left alone for a short time before the server returns with their food. Hannibal sips his water.

"Does it hurt at all?" Will says out of the blue, eyes still pinging elsewhere behind Hannibal. He brings his free hand to his throat and watches how it instantly pulls Will's gaze and holds it. His tongue sneaks out to wet his lower lip, and Hannibal drops his hand to the table, satisfied.

"It has already begun to heal." Hannibal leans back in his seat, tipping his head back just a fraction. Will's lips part as his eyes follow the motion. He is much too obvious about the things he likes.

"About that, about last night…"

"Yes, Will."

“Yes, what?” He looks flummoxed, balling up the end of his napkin grievously in his fingers.

“I wanted to.”

Hannibal both feels and hears the whoosh of air that expels from Will’s lungs in that moment. His face absolutely burns tomato red. It’s quite a lovely display. He is so expressive. Hannibal wants to taste the color on his tongue; wants to feel it blossom in his mouth.

“You wanted to.” Will’s chest expands with a quick deep breath. A small relieved laugh falls freely from his lips. Hannibal rewards Will with a smile, watching his pupils dilate.

“I propose we pursue our feelings further when we are returned to our homes.”

“Is that what you propose?” Will rubs his hand along his cheek. His grin has stretched wider on his face. Will truly is stunning when he smiles. “Jesus, I was worried about this all day, and you were *teasing* me about it at the funeral home.” Hannibal chuckles.

“A strategic attempt to gauge your reaction; it was crass of me, I apologize.”

“Well, it wouldn’t be like you to dive feet first into anything.” Will mumbles, shaking his head.

“Were you prepared to dive feet first, Will?”

“It felt like you were going to make me for a minute there.”

“I would never be so cruel. Your trust is too important to me.” Will’s smile falters. A flicker of wonder crosses Will’s face. It lights him up in a way that is remarkable and takes Hannibal’s breath away. He did that; he made Will feel that, and he could do so, so much more once they had time. There is nothing stopping them now. Hannibal will give him the world. All Will needs to do is let him.

The feeling drifts away from Will, and he opens his mouth to speak, but his voice catches. Their waiter has returned with the oysters and dates. He leaves them on the table silently, sensing he has just walked in on something significant, something far more significant than he can ever know.

He whisks away without a word, and Will looks down, his thought forgotten, for now. Hannibal doesn’t press.

He can be impassibly patient when he desires something. He desires Will and his unbreakable faith, so he will wait as long as Will needs him to wait. The reward will far surpass anything Hannibal has ever endeavored to claim for himself; it will be better than the men he killed for Mischa; it will be better than his love for Lady Murasaki or the love with which she reciprocated before he had to leave her. He can feel it in his bones that Will is the one he has waited for, the one who will walk with him in darkness and stand at his side in the unforgiving light of day. Will is the one he will have.

The dates are stuffed with goat cheese and wrapped in bacon. He thinks to use his fork, but it has been made very clear to him as of late that Will enjoys seeing Hannibal taken down a few

pegs where sophistication crosses with leisure, so he lifts a date to his mouth with his fingers and bites.

Will takes his cues from Hannibal and starts in with his oysters, holding the shell in his palm and chipping lightly at the base of the meat with a fork. Will makes a bit of a mess. Hannibal likes the way it looks; Will's fingers are shiny from the oil used to cook the oysters, but his fingers don't slip around the long handle of the fork. He frees the lustrous body of the tiny mollusk. Hannibal swallows his mouthful and watches Will chew.

Hannibal lets Will catch him in the act of staring, and just as Will is about to protest, Hannibal takes the second half of the date into his mouth. His finger touches his bottom lip briefly before returning to the table. Will swallows twice before looking away.

Their waiter returns some time later to inquire as to what kind of salad and entrée they will be having tonight. Will dabs at his mouth with his napkin and orders the Simple Green Salad and the Spinach Gnudi. Hannibal isn't particularly surprised; it is one of the cheaper items on the menu. He orders the Hazelnut-Crusted Chevre and the Wild-Caught Halibut. Will pointedly looks over Hannibal's shoulder like he knows he has been caught pinching pennies and does not want to talk about it.

They continue with their oysters and dates. Hannibal makes a point to brush his bottom lip with his fingers when he eats the remaining dates on his plate. Will watches, too appreciative and too embarrassed, to say anything, though he looks visibly irritated by Hannibal's performance—no, by his own receptivity to it.

"It was nice of you to arrange everything for Casson's funeral." Will speaks when he's polished off the last of the oysters. He slept for an entire day, and his hunger had probably not hit him until his second or third oyster. He twists the napkin around the points of his fingers and wipes along his palm where some juice from the shells has dyed his skin a pale yellow.

"Chief Lewis volunteered, but the death of one of his own has deeply affected him. I offered so he would not have to."

"It's more than a lot of people would have done." Will nods. Hannibal eats the final bite of his dates. Will watches Hannibal take the tips of each of his fingers into his mouth. Ordinarily, he would never do something so vulgar at the dinner table, but Will has him breaking most of his etiquette rules the closer they get to their harmony, to their union, to their truth and perfection. "Especially for Casson." Will clears his throat and looks away.

"People were not fond of him?"

"That's what I said." Will mumbles, shaking his head. "But what you did for him, it's good; really thoughtful of you."

"What I did for him." Hannibal muses. "Had you been about your wits I am sure you would have joined me." Will smiles, thinking this a credit to his clemency and altruism and not an appeal to the darker tendencies in him that Hannibal wishes to emphasize and explore.

The waiter brings their salads. Despite being inexpensive and plain, Will's salad is not unimpressive. He stabs through a few leaves of baby greens and spears a carrot with his fork before bringing it to his mouth and making quick work of it. Hannibal underestimated his appetite. Clearly the closer they get to the main dish, the more Will hungers for it. Hannibal eats his salad in contemplative silence. He wonders if this fact about Will extends to other things. He wonders how he can use it.

Halfway through his salad, Will finishes off his wine. Their waiter reappears to refill Will's glass with the Sangiovese wine and augments the dwindling water in Hannibal's as well. He says something about their meal. Hannibal nods, and Will drinks his wine. The waiter is spinning away to another table when Hannibal sees it.

Will is turned to the right so he can look out the window at the blackened night. His arm is held to the side, and the wine glass is held to his lips, halted in the middle of a thought. He looks down into his glass, swishes, and then tips his head back just slightly as he takes a long drink.

The wine is a deep purple, much darker than the bruises at Will's throat, but the grapes that made them would have been spot-on. The luscious, almost navy discoloration painting his skin matches that of the Sangiovese grape's delicate flesh. Will sees Hannibal watching his throat as he swallows, and a slow, cautious smile lights across his lips. Hannibal wants to kiss him. If it weren't absolutely a necessity that Will eat right now and not be bombarded by Hannibal's affections, he would topple the table and taste that smile on his tongue.

It would taste sharp and tangy like cherries, and it would taste rich and smooth like Will, like Sangiovese grapes. Their waiter removes their emptied salad bowls. He comes and goes, and no words are spoken. Will's eyes are on Hannibal, searching. Hannibal doesn't let him go.

"Do we have to wait to wait until we get home?" Will asks softly, his voice betraying his nerves. He bites his lip waiting for Hannibal's answer. The brilliant red scabbing in the middle has the fresh look of a recent puncture.

"I thought out of respect for Casson, we might."

"I didn't even like him." The answer tumbles out of Will's mouth before he can think better of it. Hannibal can see the gears turning in Will's head, trying to make him regret what he's said, but Will merely closes his eyes, sighs, and says: "Why shouldn't we be happy if we want to be?"

"Are you happy, Will?" His eyes open, and they find Hannibal's, and they stay there.

"Yes." He whispers. Hannibal rises to lean forward over the table and kiss Will on the lips, a gentle touch, soft enough to be tame, purposeful enough to quickly become more.

He places his hand on Will's jaw, his fingers brushing at Will's hairline. Will reaches up to thread his fingers through Hannibal's. He swipes his tongue along the seam of Will's lips and then breaks the kiss as Will's mouth is opening up to him like a flower in sunlight. A beat passes, and Hannibal pulls away. Will's eyes are at half-mast. His lips are parted and wet

from Hannibal's tongue. Will runs his own along his bottom lip after a dazed moment, unhurried in its perusal of Hannibal's taste in the sheen of saliva he left behind.

Will smiles into his wine even as the waiter returns with the Spinach Gnudi and the plate of steaming Halibut. It smells wonderful. He will have to tip graciously and give his compliments to the chef.

Will's hunger has calmed in the time they have had to wait for their meal, but upon taking his first bite, that hunger returns. He paces himself enough that Hannibal does not have to remind him to slow down and enjoy it, but he still polishes off his plate at a rate Hannibal does not try to match. Will slows down three quarters of the way through, though, and Hannibal manages to catch up so they finish at the same time.

"Would you gentlemen care for dessert?" The waiter asks politely, eyeing Will's diminished glass of wine. Will raises his eyebrows at Hannibal in question, perhaps asking permission.

"Raspberry Cassis for me. Will?" The waiter looks again to Will.

"Um, the same, please." He nods, sliding his unused spoon across the surface of the table nervously with his first two fingers.

"And I'll be back with some more wine for you as well, Sir." He bows his head and quietly leaves them before Will can protest to the wine. Hannibal can see the first two glasses warming Will up on the inside. His eyes shine with it. There is something patient and coaxing in a good wine that cannot be found in cheap whisky or in the finest beer. It has put Will at ease. Hannibal wants to kiss him again.

"What's in Raspberry Cassis?" Will rolls the French word about on his tongue. Hannibal bites the inside of his lip. Will is tipsy, and the waiter is refilling his glass for the second time tonight with an entertained look on his face. Hannibal would be offended if he, too, were not entertained.

The waiter looks at Hannibal, and Hannibal nods.

"Raspberry sorbet in a chocolate shell served with whipped cream, Crème de Cassis, and Chambord." He recites perfectly.

"Chambord is…"

"Raspberry liqueur, Will." Hannibal can't help but smile.

"That sounds nice." The waiter silently laughs to himself as he makes off with the wine bottle and ducks back into the kitchen.

"You will like it, I think. It will complement your wine."

"Sangiovese." Will tries the word in his mouth. "Raspberry Cassis." He looks off to a corner of the room and then back at Hannibal with a shy smile. "I might be a little drunk."

“You had half a glass on an empty stomach.” Hannibal observes. Will looks down at his glass.

“Yes.” Their waiter returns with two small plates of the sorbet. The bitten red color is vivid next to Will’s skin. He holds it to his lips and then takes a self-conscious bite. Hannibal watches his lips close around the spoon. A small fleck of deep maroon dots the corner of his mouth. Will licks at it with his tongue, oblivious to Hannibal’s staring eyes. “Mm.” Will hums thoughtfully, poking at the frozen dessert with his spoon.

“The verdict?”

“It’s good.” Will smiles, bringing another bite to his lips. Hannibal very much wants to kiss him again.

Instead, he takes up his own spoon and takes a few small bites of the frosty sorbet. Will begins to laugh softly from his side of the table.

“What is it, Will?”

“I just realized I’ve been walking around with a handprint on my neck all day.”

“We make quite a pair.” Hannibal says, licking his lips. The taste there is fresh and sweet. Will would taste just like it. Will would taste just like him.

“That we do.” Will says, eyes falling to Hannibal’s throat once more. He has been staring at it on and off all night. Hannibal supposes he meant to be inconspicuous, but Hannibal always follows wherever Will’s eyes land. He wants to know as much about what goes on in Will’s chaotic, beautiful mind as he can. He wants to control what goes into it, if he can; wants to sway it to his liking so that his wishes are Will’s also, so that his emotion is Will’s.

“Would you like to see it?” Hannibal fingers the bandage. Will’s mouth drops open. “Later, in the car.” Hannibal revises. Will blushes, further solidifying Hannibal’s suspicion that he enjoys flustering Will and catching him off his guard; more, he enjoys the cardinal red of Will’s blood as it filters through his cheeks and down his neck like an interactive map guiding Hannibal in where to press his tongue.

“If you’re okay with that.” Will says quietly after a moment. The waiter brings the check. Will shakes his head before he can say anything, and the man smiles politely, though his face turns red with embarrassment. Hannibal finds it isn’t nearly as enjoyable watching him do it.

“I would like to thank the chef if I may.” Hannibal says to the waiter as he stacks their plates on his arm. His face lights up when he asks.

“Just a moment, Sir. I’ll bring her right out.”

He pays the bill, hardly sparing Will a glance when he asks how much his split comes out to, and leaves a generous tip. Will shrugs on his jacket and stands to his feet when the waiter returns with a buxom woman drying her hands on a towel. Hannibal stands, too. Their waiter has his hand on her arm and a wide grin on his face. They are romantically involved.

“Heather Lachlan.” She extends her hand to Hannibal.

“Dr. Hannibal Lecter,” They shake hands. She moves onto Will. “My associate, Will Graham.”

“So lovely to meet you.” She beams.

“The Spinach Gnudi was fantastic.” Will nods, swallowing convulsively around his compliment.

“And the sorbet was exquisite.” Hannibal smiles. She bows her head gratefully. “Have you been a chef here long?”

“Almost ten years now, Rudy?”

“Eleven next spring, baby.” He stammers. “I mean—Ms. Lachlan will have been with us for eleven years in the spring.” He says in an official tone. Heather gives him a look that is something in between annoyance and adoration. Rudy smiles unabashedly at her. Hannibal reads the name Rudolphus on his nametag.

“You are lucky to have each other. Your skills align nicely to accommodate your work here.”

“His parents thought it wouldn’t be good for us to go into the business together.” Rudy shrugs.

“Well, they’re an accountant and a lawyer. Their nine to five isn’t the same as our nine to five.”

“You never work a day if you love what you do.” Will interjects. Rudy laughs and says it’s true.

“What do you two do?” Heather asks, tucking the towel away into an apron pocket.

“Special Investigator with the FBI.” Will looks at Hannibal.

“I am a psychiatrist.”

“You were looking into those murders, weren’t you?” Heather says with a knit in her brow. Will nods his head once. “I feel like I should be shaking your hands for doing away with that awful woman.” Heather squeezes Rudy’s arm. He’s fallen very quiet. Her touch stirs him back to attention. His eyes are wet when he smiles.

“We should toast.”

“Oh, no.” Will puts up his hands.

“Will,” Hannibal looks at Will. He watches the flighty panic dissipate and cloud over into mild uncertainty and then calm acceptance. “We have kept you from your duties long enough already. We would not be good guests to further impose.”

“Don’t be silly. Amanda can cover his tables, and we’ve got more than enough hands in the kitchen.” Heather smiles even as she sends Rudy a discreet worried glance. His eyes are sad again. “Come on, Rude Stuff.” He brightens and stands a touch straighter.

“Wine, Mr. Graham?” That brings Will out of his discomfort with a laugh very quickly. Rudy is a rare person; quick to be liked, skilled at keeping it that way. He sidesteps Heather and disappears into the kitchen. Hannibal sits down, and Will follows his lead. Heather slinks into the booth next to Will, not close but next to Will all the same. Hannibal has half a mind to trade places with her, but that would be an immature and flagrant display of jealousy.

“Rudy lost a friend recently, in those killings; Joshua Greene.” Will drops his eyes to the table guiltily. The sixth victim: aged 46, stabbed repeatedly in the stomach and decorated with red marks down both arms. “They grew up together.”

“I’m sorry we weren’t able to catch her sooner.” Will croaks, bringing a shaky wine glass to his lips. Hannibal reaches across the table to take his elbow in his hand. The shaking subsists, and Will takes two long drinks before setting the glass back down on the table. Hannibal’s fingers follow the motion and clasp firmly around Will’s forearm. He looks up after a moment and valiantly attempts a reassuring smile. He makes it about halfway.

“How long have you two been together?” Heather asks, sounding a thousand miles away from how wholly focused in on Will Hannibal is. “I know it’s not my business, but…” Will looks at her and then at Hannibal and then down at the table. He pulls his arm out from under Hannibal’s fingers, and for a second, Hannibal is enraged and thinks to cut the woman’s throat for distracting Will at such a delicately stitched moment in time. But Will is touching Hannibal’s fingers with his fingers, curious and astonished. “You really have something incredible. I can tell.”

Will angles his hand just so, and their fingers lace together. The air in the room is warm as Hannibal breathes in deeply. Heather looks up as Rudy emerges from the kitchen. “Really have something incredible…” Will murmurs under his breath. Hannibal squeezes his fingers, and Will looks up, surprised.

He squeezes back and smiles small. His eyes are glistening.

“Cappuccino for the lady, Grand Marnier Coffee for the doctor, and scotch for the Special Investigator,” He eyes Will’s wine glass, newly drained. “Unless…?”

“No.” Will firmly shakes his head. “No more wine, thank you.” Rudy smiles good-naturedly at Heather. She smiles back and takes up her drink.

“What shall we drink to?” Hannibal asks, taking up his drink in his right hand so as not to disconnect his fingers from Will’s. Will uses his left hand to dubiously raise his glass. Rudy slides in next to Hannibal. He doesn’t mind it so much. It levels the playing field.

“To new friends and good food?” Rudy suggests.

“To health, Rudy. And to new friends and good food.” Heather edits. She smiles and clinks glasses with Rudy. Hannibal nods and touches glasses with the three seated with him at the

table. They talk for a while more before Rudy begins to pick up cold looks, presumably from the waitress known as Amanda.

“Well, that’s my cue.” He says apologetically. “Drinks are on the house, fellas. Don’t worry about it, and um, thanks, you know, for all the good work you do.” His words are sincere, if bashful. He quickly shakes hands with both Hannibal and Will and then dances off down the dining room to deposit the emptied glass of cider and Will’s wine glass in the kitchen before picking up a pitcher of water and flitting about the floor to tend to his tables. Hannibal watches him a while. He wonders where he picked up his skillful footwork.

“Funny, isn’t he?” Heather says lovingly, looking over her shoulder to watch Rudy work. “His mother put him in ballet when he turned three. He hates for people to know it, but it’s left him slender and graceful, so he never complains either.”

“I thought I detected something refined to him.” Will downs the remainder of his drink. “Does he still practice?”

“Not with a troupe. I catch him twirling around in the kitchen at home sometimes.” She laughs into her glass, taking a final sip before sighing and getting to her feet. “It’s been lovely getting to know you gents.” She extends her hand to Will, and he takes his hand away from Hannibal’s to shake it once. He finds Hannibal’s hand again when she releases him. Heather tracks the gesture with her eyes as Hannibal shakes her hand. She smiles secretively at Hannibal. “Only opens up when it’s just the two of you, huh? Sweet thing.” It is affectionate and matronly when she says it, and Hannibal is not threatened.

The blood floats up across the bottom of Will’s neck, and no, Hannibal does not feel threatened by that.

“You boys be good to each other.” She takes the last two emptied glasses from the table and leaves for the kitchen.

“Have a good night, Ms. Lachlan.”

“Thank you! Good night, Dr. Lecter, Will.” Will smiles and nods. He stands to his feet, and he walks ahead of Hannibal to the exit doors. The air is cold and fresh from the rain that has been marinating on the asphalt all afternoon. They walk side by side, shoulders brushing through their jackets. Will is looking up at the starless sky, too cluttered with new rainclouds to permit but the faintest shards of moonlight to filter through into the orange-tinted parking lot illuminated by one lamppost.

Will stops abruptly at the curb after passing the last window and turns. He grabs Hannibal by his biceps much like he did under Hannibal’s influence and pulls Hannibal into him so their mouths crush together. Hannibal presses back, opening his lips to Will and tasting the sorbet in his mouth.

Hannibal backs Will into the side of the building, harvesting Will’s greedy moans on his tongue. He tastes the dull fire of alcohol on his lips, the bittersweet Sangiovese wine, and the syrupy Chambord. He holds Will close so their bodies touch through all their layers of

clothing. He fists his hand in Hannibal's hair, and gasps for air before diving into Hannibal's mouth again.

Hannibal presses his hips into Will's gently, experimentally. Will exhales noisily, his lips moving from Hannibal's mouth to explore his jaw, his chin. He thumbs at Hannibal's bandage. Hannibal leans away to lock eyes with Will. The drowsing effects of the alcohol have passed, for the most part. Will's eyes are clear when they look back at Hannibal. They are mischievous. A smirk tugs at the corner of his lips. His thumb pinches ruinously at the bandage, nails scratching at Hannibal's skin. He bunches the discarded thing thoughtlessly into his jacket pocket and seizes Hannibal's throat before Hannibal can object to his handling of the filthy dressing.

"You hardly need it anymore." Will murmurs into the congealed rows of punctures. He licks along the roughened ridges before nipping at the side of Hannibal's neck and moving down the cricoid cartilage to suck. Hannibal hums his approval before leaning back out of Will's reach.

They are both breathing heavily. Hannibal cups Will in his hand to find that he is, indeed, fostering a steadily growing erection to match Hannibal's. Will groans and nuzzles Hannibal's cheek with his nose before kissing him on the corner of his mouth and then taking his tongue across Hannibal's upper lip.

"We should be going." Will breathes, even as he is grinding his hips up to meet with Hannibal's, rubbing their groins tightly together. He runs his hands down Hannibal's chest, bites at Hannibal's jawline and kisses down his throat. His exhales are sighs, and his inhales are deep breaths taken through the mouth. "Right, Hannibal? We should go."

"Yes, we had better." He breaks away from Will and walks briskly to the car and Will laughs as he comes running after him.

"You like leaving me breathless, don't you?"

"I like knowing that I can." Hannibal teases, unlocking the Nissan and getting inside. Will sits in the passenger's seat and shakes his head.

"What is this?" Will asks, the smile on his face dwindling, mirth dancing still in his eyes.

"I thought I was courting you."

"You've always been courting me. It's different now."

"You were not cooperating before."

"I didn't know you were *courting* me before."

"You know now." Hannibal smiles at Will conspiratorially. "You have proven worthy of the chase."

"What does that mean?" Will laughs, seemingly skeptical that they can be having this conversation. Hannibal turns on the car and backs out of the parking lot.

“What do you think it means?”

“Oh, come on. Not this.” Will shakes his head, an open smile on his face. He looks giddy. Hannibal did that, too. “You can’t just tell me?”

“I must keep some things about myself a mystery, or you will tire of me.”

“I don’t think so.” Will scoffs.

“What does that mean?” Hannibal sees Will watching him in his peripheral vision. He wants to look, but if he does, Will might turn away. He might back away, and patient as Hannibal can force himself to be, he wants this. He wants this one thing, tonight, because Will is going to tell him. He can feel it bubbling at the surface; can feel the air catching in Will’s lungs as he searches for the right words.

He does look away. Before Hannibal can feel disappointment set in, Will begins to speak.

“You let me in. No one else ever did that before.” His voice is low; it is the lonely sound of a creature left on its own for too long that has seen a glimpse of a bright, beautiful future. Hannibal waits, but Will doesn’t say anything else. They reach their destination at the hotel in a brief five minutes. Will licks his lips nervously when the engine shuts off. Hannibal undoes his seatbelt and watches Will.

“People are afraid of me.” Will whispers, jaw clenching.

“And they should be.” Hannibal murmurs, running his fingers along Will’s neck where the skin is bruised with his mark. “But not for the reasons that they are.” Will looks at him, eyes questioning.

“Why should they be?”

“Because you could be more.” Hannibal murmurs, kissing Will’s cheekbone and then his temple. Will’s eyes flutter shut. He leans into the press of Hannibal’s lips in his hair. “You could be more dangerous than any thousand killers they hunt, and if you wanted it so, they would never catch you. They would never know to look for you.” He kisses Will’s forehead and undoes his seatbelt. “They should be wary of you, Will Graham. You are not fine China, nor are you an old mug.”

“I’m a mongoose.” Will smiles against Hannibal’s lips. Hannibal kisses him.

“You are whatever you choose to be; not what Jack says you are, and not what I say you are.” Will nips at Hannibal’s lips, licking his way into Hannibal’s mouth after a moment. Their tongues move against each other lightly and then pick up heat as they wrestle more feverishly in their mouths. Hannibal runs his fingers through Will’s hair and pulls slightly so Will’s head tips back and Hannibal can bend down and taste the bruise of his hand on Will’s neck like he has been wanting to since he laid eyes on Will at the funeral home. Will moans at the slow, sensuous lick Hannibal leaves along the shadow of Hannibal’s thumb.

His fingers grab at Hannibal's jacket and undo the clasps and the zipper so he can bunch Hannibal's shirt in his hands. He allows Hannibal enough time to suck darker marks into the bruises before he pulls him up clumsily by his chin so he can kiss him again. He sighs dejectedly when Hannibal pulls away.

"This lot is under surveillance, Will."

"I don't care." Will shakes his head. Hannibal hisses around a shocked inhale when Will bites him hard at the base of his throat.

"They will send security to break us apart."

"Let them try." Will murmurs, bringing a smile to Hannibal's face.

"Will," He leaves one closed-mouth kiss on Will's lips. "You have been gone all day. Jack and Alana will be worried about you."

"Alana knows I'm with you. I told her before I left, *dad*." Hannibal bites Will's earlobe. "Well, I did." He grumbles, heaving a sigh. "I don't know how to act like nothing's changed here." Will looks out the windshield at the wall of the building the parked car faces. The beginnings of a mural have been painted into the brick. It is all abstract shapes and cool colors; Hannibal can't decipher what it might become. "Has something changed here?" He looks down at his hand. Hannibal is weaving his fingers through his and holding him, holding on.

"Do you wish for something to have changed here?"

"Are you asking if I like kissing you because that's what it sounds like you're asking." Will furrows his brows seriously at Hannibal but laughs when Hannibal bites his bottom lip. He pulls back enough so that he can look into Hannibal's eyes, which he has done more and more frequently today. He looks down at Hannibal's mouth and then back up at Hannibal's nose.

"I don't ask questions I already know the answers to, Will."

"Liar." Will grins, kissing Hannibal once more before leaning away and opening the door to escape from the car.

"I take offense to that." Hannibal says, stepping out of the vehicle and locking up with the keys. He walks in step with Will. "We have established already that my behavior at the funeral parlor was manipulative and uncalled for."

"I sincerely wish that was the only time I caught you playing dumb." Hannibal looks at Will curiously. "Not dumb, I mean. Um, ignorant, playing ignorant." Hannibal won't deny it.

"It would be foolhardy of me to give you all the answers."

"I guess things are sweeter when you work to get them." Will says, staring down at Hannibal's hand brushing against his. Hannibal scoops Will's hand up in his, tying their fingers together. "Though you *could* have been less subtle about the whole courtship thing."

“I thought you might have bolted like a spooked horse.” Hannibal says, showing Will his smile to let him know he’s kidding with him; to let him know it’s because he loves the rash of red that flickers across his fair skin like a mist when he’s embarrassed. Hannibal leans in and licks Will’s cheekbone where the rose has blossomed most brilliantly beneath his flesh. Will turns a brighter shade of red all over and stops walking.

“You licked me.” He sounds incredulous.

“Hm, hard to avoid.” He licks the pulse point beneath his mandible where the color has fallen. He feels four quick beats tap against his tongue before he’s moved too far away.

“I take back what I said before.” Hannibal straightens out. Will kisses him, sweetly and chastely on the lips before he can ask. “I find you very interesting, Dr. Lecter.” Will starts walking again toward the sidewalk that leads to the hotel. Hannibal walks, too, so their fingers do not pull apart. Will squeezes his hand and gives him a nervous side glance before walking around to the front of the building.

Will’s lets go when the front door come into view, and Hannibal can’t find room to mourn the loss. He has earned something much more promising and much more sustaining than a brief touch of hands. He lets Will lead the way into the building. A few people loiter about in the lobby; no one Hannibal recognizes. It is already half past eight. He rides up to four with Will, and they don’t speak or look at each other. Their fingers graze in the silence, demure but electric; innocent but wrought with intent.

The doors open, too soon, and Will removes his fingers from where they are entwined with Hannibal’s. They walk together down the hall. Hannibal stops with Will at his door to press a hand to the small of his back and steal one last kiss before bed. Will draws it out, mouthing at Hannibal’s lips and tasting his tongue one more time. Will looks blissful when Hannibal pulls away.

Hannibal pushes Will’s glasses up his nose and fights the impulse to taste Will’s skin where he blushes bright red. Will turns to unlock the door and reluctantly retires to his bedroom with a final glance at Hannibal before he shuts the door. Hannibal walks further down the hall to his bedroom and goes to bed.

Tomorrow will be a long day.

Chapter End Notes

Evening Dining Menu: Peter Herdic House (all meals and drinks and thangs came from their website)
http://www.herdichouse.com/the-restaurant/menu/evening-dining-menu

I hope everyone's happy. While writing this I typed into my search engine: *Eating dates with a fork.*
And then I stopped myself BECAUSE WILL IS HIS DATE THE DATES ARE PEOPLE, OMG. This fucking fandom, man. I see cannibalism everywhere now. I wish I could quit you! ...Not really...
As it turns out, dates are (or they can be? I've never had them) finger food. Read into that however you like. ;D

A Little Game

Chapter Summary

Our boys attend Casson's memorial and shenanigans ensue.

Chapter Notes

Just close your eyes forget your name/Forget the world, forget the people/And we'll erect a different steeple/This little game is fun to do/Just close your eyes, no way to lose/And I'm right there, I'm going, too/Release control, we're breaking through

The wake is held early in the morning. Hannibal wears a black suit and tie with a deep blue shirt. He is one of the first to arrive along with Chief Lewis and the divorced wife of the deceased. Reggie and Mitchel busy themselves in the viewing room, perfecting any slight oddities they come across. One of the pink roses in the vase beside the casket has wilted. Reggie pulls it and gives it to the former Mrs. Casson. She stares at it uncomprehendingly from where she sits in the first row. He leaves the room and returns with a vibrant rose of the same color with a dripping green stem.

Mitchel gives his brother a look for getting water on the floor. They have a silent argument about who will clean it up. The head funeral director walks in with a mop, having seen the problem from afar. He presses it wordlessly into Reggie's hand and leaves the room with a clipboard. Reggie looks at the mop and at his brother and cleans the water from the floor. Mitchel leaves him to it, satisfied but too aware of his surroundings to make a greater show of it.

Hannibal watches the woman with the rose. Her eyes are dry but red around the edges. She has only applied a minimal amount of makeup to her eyes and face; no lip stick, no mascara. The flower droops in her hands and hangs down the floor. She looks dazed.

"Excuse me," A beat passes. He touches a hand to her shoulder, and she starts. Her eyes are wide when they find Hannibal's. "Forgive me."

"You're all right." Her voice is a rasp, a broken whisper. "You scared me. I—I startle easily." She nods to herself, eyes dropping to the floor. "Mitchel said you arranged all this?" He nods, sitting quietly beside her. "What's your name?"

"Hannibal Lecter." Her eyes are like Will's are when he wants desperately to make eye contact but knows he will give away too much if he does. They flicker between his

cheekbones, scoring higher on his face but then retreating.

“Oh, that's right. You're that doctor." He affirms with a slight bow of his head. "Right, uh, Enid. I’m Enid Santos.” She shakes his hand. It is small and dainty in his, clammy. She smells of grapefruit and cut grass. The latter scent is incidental, a marker of her home in all likelihood. The former is a subtle, though delightful perfume.

“The death of a loved one can be difficult.” He speaks into her silence. The tears well up in her eyes.

“I haven’t loved James for a long time now.” She smiles somewhat self-deprecatingly. Hannibal can smell the slightly sour anxiolytic mingling with the earthy aromas surrounding her. She smoked several menthol cigarettes outside; the smoke stayed in her hair. “He could be difficult.”

“But you loved him once.” Her answering laugh carries a mournful sound; it is regretful. It brings out the smell of the anxiolytic in her bloodstream, which makes the grapefruit smell sweeter, fresher. It resembles the odor of fear, but it is too light. It is only stress and grief paired with an empty stomach.

“When we were young and stupid, and getting married was the thing to do.” She nods distantly, the bottom edge of her smile quivering just so.

“You never had children?” Her body goes rigid. “That is none of my business. I am sorry.” Her shoulders fall into a slump, destroying her posture and causing her black dress to sag around her waist. “I was informed he had no surviving family but for you.”

“He didn’t.” She takes a quick breath and looks the other way before righting herself again and wiping hurriedly at a tear from the eye farthest from Hannibal. He produces a handkerchief for her to use. Enid takes it after a moment’s hesitation. “He lost his mother when he was young, and his father died in a boating accident back when we lived in California.”

“No siblings?”

“An older brother, died in Afghanistan. There’s an uncle from his mother’s side, but he was never close with that part of his family. He had a hard time after she passed.”

“He has not had an easy life.”

“Oh,” Her breath catches. She muffles it with the handkerchief. He lays a hand on her back, and she leans into him. The handkerchief is a shield over her eyes; Hannibal’s body is her rock and foundation. He thinks her blood might taste like grapefruit were he to bite her. He knows better than that, of course, because the anxiety medication would overpower all over flavors present, but she truly does smell wonderful. He can hardly help but to breathe her in. Her shoulders tremble under his arm. It makes her feel much smaller than she is, much more breakable.

Mitchel is shining the foot of the casket when he notices the two of them sitting together. He says nothing and looks away without judgment or suspicion. He has worked in this business long enough that he knows to routinely avoid outbursts of grief such as this one unless he is personally sought out. He is quite the professional.

“He was a better man than anyone ever gave him credit for.” She says, pulling away from Hannibal. She holds her head high with grace and stubborn dignity. Hannibal admires that while she may not be strong for Casson’s sake, she can be strong for herself. She sniffles and dabs at her nose firmly but politely with the handkerchief. “He wasn’t perfect.” She blinks, and wet lashes brush against her paled brown cheeks. She would have complemented Casson, aesthetically speaking; his skin pale, hers olive; his hair blond and thinning, hers deep brown and thick.

She licks her lips thoughtfully, eyes glued to the opened casket. Her tear swollen lips are the color of watermelon; they fall into a straight line. The tears do not resurface; her frame is still and solid. Hannibal removes his arm from around her and listens to her breathe, watches her chest rise with each inhale and depress with each exhale. She is composed.

“He died bravely.” Hannibal does not make his voice soft when he says this. She continues to breathe.

“Lewis says he’s a hero.”

“What do you think he is?” She looks at him. The morning sunlight filters in through the window behind them and catches the tree bark brown in her eyes like a flame.

“I think he’s dead, Dr. Lecter.” Her skin is clear; no abused patches of reddened skin, no dried tears. The fire still burns in her eyes, but she is not angry. “I think a sad, lonely woman cornered him in an empty parking lot and stabbed him to death.” She looks away. “He’s a big celebrity and everyone knows his name, yet here we are to see him off, and all I see are a bunch of cops.” She laughs wryly.

“I am not a cop.” He smiles when he catches her eyes, a small and unassuming lift of his lips. “Those who would praise him have no need to mourn him. He is famous to them in death, as a martyr. A funeral is not a courtesy extended to our dead but an opportunity lent to the living that we might say our last goodbyes.” She squeezes the white square in her hands once and relaxes her fingers, watching the cloth uncurl in her palm.

“Why are you here if you’re not a cop? Why do this for him? James didn’t mean anything to you.” Her tone is not accusatory; it is merely curious.

“A friend of mine works with the FBI. He has been here for the past week looking for Fontaine Preston.” Enid drops her eyes and nods. “He fell ill a few days ago, and his superior asked that I come here to assist him.”

“Are you his doctor?”

“We are both consultants. Unofficially, I am his therapist.”

“Where are you based out of?”

“Baltimore.”

“You made that trip for a patient?” She says, watching Hannibal’s face.

“Yes.” She says nothing, and her face gives nothing away. “And to help catch a killer.” A shaky smile graces her lips. She closes her eyes and takes a few deep breaths in and out. After a few moments pass in silence, she stands to her feet.

“I’m just gonna go see him for a bit before we get started.” She says quietly. Her hands twist the square cut of cloth one way and then the other. “Thank you for listening.”

“Of course.” He nods his head, and she turns. The black dress hangs just below her slender knees; the skirt frills out just slightly when she turns. She would have been beautiful standing next to the soldierly James Casson, like a regal Cleopatra standing beside a battle-ready Mark Antony. Much like Cleopatra, she had outlived her warrior; she had held an asp to her breast, unwittingly.

Hannibal stands and turns to watch the door. Jack is speaking to Chief Lewis where he sits in the back row staring at his lap and furiously blinking his eyes. He and Beverly Katz are standing to his right in the aisle. The mousy brunet called Peter Goodwin sits at his left. His eyes stare vacantly toward the front of the room. Alana Bloom is in the seat beside him, looking at his profile as she speaks calming words to him.

Will is nowhere to be seen. Reggie walks passed him carrying a stack of manila folders in one arm and a large cardboard box under the other. One of the guests bumps into him, and the stack falls out of his hands. Many of the documents stay tucked away in their allotted folders, but a few papers slide out. Reggie fumbles to set the box down and then crouches to collect the papers. Hannibal kneels beside the young man and helps him gather a few of the ones out of his reach.

“Allow me to take that.” Hannibal gestures at the box, and Reggie hands it over with a gracious smile. Hannibal follows him into the back offices and sets the box where Reggie asks him to. He turns to go but stops when Reggie begins to talk.

“That Will Graham does some dangerous work, doesn’t he? All you FBI types do, I guess.”

“We are not FBI.”

“You’re as deep in it as Chief Lewis or, uh…” He snaps his fingers. “Crawford, though, right?”

“We can be.” Hannibal nods.

“That has to take a toll after a while, seeing all the bad things people do to each other.”

“Will is very good at what he does.”

“I don’t doubt that. He just seems…” Reggie straightens the uneven edges of the folders he has yet to shelf. “He seems like a nice guy.”

“He is.” Reggie smiles. Hannibal knows he knows. “When I met him, he was not looking to make friends.”

“So you became his friend.” They laugh.

“I would have been a fool to pass up on the opportunity.” Reggie hums thoughtfully. He does not quite act or look his age anyway, but he appears much older in a full suit. He watches the man check his watch.

“Looks like we’ll be getting started here in a while, Dr. Lecter. Thanks for the extra set of hands with Officer Casson’s funeral. It’s nice to work with someone who knows what he’s doing for a change.” He says jokingly in reference to his brother. Hannibal bows his head, feeling distinctly as if he has just passed a test. He leaves the room and spots Will hovering in the doorway of the viewing room with his jacket slung over his arm.

“I would have given you a ride, Will.” Will starts at the sound of his voice and spins around.

“I like the walk.” His eyes are on Hannibal’s lapels.

“And the baseball field?”

“Yeah,” Will looks to the side. His eyes befall the casket across the room and linger for a moment before catching Hannibal’s and dropping to their feet. “There’s a kid that plays there. I kind of…” Will grimaces around the words he leaves unsaid. “I don’t know.”

“You empathized with one of the players.”

“First with the father, but the son, too.” Will looks relieved not to have to admit it in so many words. Hannibal will allow for things to be this easy for Will, for now. “Overbearing, controlling; the kid can’t stand him, or baseball, for that matter.”

“Why do you think you have fixated on them specifically?” Hannibal leads Will into the room so Reggie will not have to walk around them. He sees the man smile to himself as he goes. He leaves his hand on the small of Will’s back, drawing oblongs into Will’s shirt with his fingers. Will’s throat constricts around the breath of air he meant to use for his reply.

“You’re doing that here?” Will says, even as he leans into Hannibal’s side.

“Would you prefer I stop?” He begins to withdraw his hand when Will grabs his arm at the inside of his elbow.

“Not if you’re going to do it anyway.” Hannibal smiles and slides his hand along Will’s hip on the way to its initial perch at his L4. He runs his fingers up along his spine, pressing into T12, T11, T10, and T9 before Will sighs and finds the words he lost.

“I overheard the father on my way up here yesterday. Now I can’t get them out of my head.”

“May I make a suggestion?” Will winces at Hannibal’s knuckle where it runs up the multifidus and semi-spinal dorsi muscles surrounding his spine.

“Yeah.” Will gasps, rolling his shoulders back. The movement opens up his front to Hannibal in a supremely attractive fashion. From any angle in the room it will look as though they are merely standing beside each other. “What is it?” He gulps.

“James Casson is dead.” Will looks at him. Hannibal digs into his T7 nerve. Will’s eye lashes flutter, but his eyes do not slip closed. “You could do nothing to save him from Fontaine Preston.” Hannibal licks his lips. “Why did she kill him, Will?”

“Because she—*Christ.*” Will bites off a curse between gritted teeth.

“My apologies.” Hannibal replaces his knuckle with the proximal and middle phalanxes of his middle finger.

“No, just…That feels better.” Will nods.

“Why did Fontaine Preston kill him, Will?”

“She thought it was the only way to love him. She was—Ah, she was crazy.”

“Not crazy, Will; manic and delusional but not crazy.”

“What is crazy then?”

“Perhaps living vicariously through one’s children via athletics.”

Will’s eyes flicker up to Hannibal’s, perfectly clear and lucid, though his breathing is slightly heavier than normal. The expression on his face is indiscernible at first, but it shifts. Will smirks.

“Psychoanalysis so early in the morning, doctor?”

“There was a time when you would not have allowed it at any time of the day.” Hannibal reminds him, fingers smoothing down his flank with less pressure. He touches Will simply to touch him now. Will is as receptive as ever. He bites his bottom lip and studies Hannibal’s tie, or his throat, more likely. Hannibal wears a bandage to cover the teeth marks for cosmetic purposes only. He understands now how Abigail must feel hiding the moon-colored patch of healed skin at her neck with a scarf each day. He wonders if she ever feels confined continually burying it like a secret.

Will doesn’t respond at first. When he does, he reverts back to an earlier point in the conversation.

“So I’m fixated on them because what, Miguel reminds me of Fontaine Preston? Would that make Tanner Casson?”

“Tanner could be any victim you felt you could not save in time. Miguel could be any killer you felt too closely.” Will flinches at the phrasing. “Abigail and her father, for instance.” The

mention of Abigail does a little in the way of grounding Will, though the mention of her father undoes it. “Are you worried for the boy’s safety?” The turn toward tangible things Will can see and touch does placate him.

“I’m not sure.” He removes his glasses and pinches the bridge of his nose. “I can’t tell if I’m overreacting or if there’s something more to it that I don’t see.”

“Do you often imprint upon strangers, Will?” The sharp glare that earns him brings a smile to his face that, of course, completely disarms Will, though he acts as if it does not. He opens his mouth to say something, but bodies begin to shuffle loudly in the previously quiet room. People are taking their seats. Will turns, and Hannibal notes the way his head angles slightly to the right when Hannibal’s hand dislodges from his back.

Will sits with Jack and Hannibal on either side of him. The woman Beverly Katz sits beside Hannibal. She smiles in greeting. He returns it.

The wake is to be a short affair. Chief Lewis reads choppily from cue cards he prepared. Peter Goodwin and a few local police officers take the podium following his speech. Enid Santos opts not to speak for Casson. She shakes her head once when Lewis invites her to stand at the front of the room. Hannibal can see her still sat alone in the front row, back straight and shoulders back.

Will keeps his hands clasped in his lap as the speeches come to a head. People begin to shuffle out of their seats row by row to line up for the casket. Will bounces his heels nervously, causing his leg to brush Hannibal’s.

“You do not have to go if you would not like to.” Hannibal murmurs, keeping his voice quiet so only Will hears him. “We could go outside.” He offers, though he knows Will already has his mind made up about going to see the body. Will sighs.

His leg leans to the side, purposely pressing his knee to Hannibal’s and keeping it there until it is their turn to rise. Beverly Katz stands at his right, and Jack stands at Will’s left. Hannibal watches Will; does not stand until Will nods his head once and hauls himself onto his feet. He follows closely behind Hannibal. They walk almost side by side down the aisle. When it comes time to approach the casket, Will hangs back.

Hannibal looks into the face of the dead man. Mitchel has done a spectacular job concealing Casson’s broken nose and getting the blood out of his wheat yellow hair.

He turns to the aisle and waves Will over. He does not leave his place before the casket as Will warily advances. His eyes are on Hannibal’s arm where it disappears into his pocket and then on Hannibal’s shoulder. Hannibal waits for him to turn his head and look down into the face of the dead James Casson. He swallows audibly and drops his eyes to Casson’s face. There is a moment where Will looks confused before reality sets in.

Hannibal waits a moment longer for the recognition to solidify in Will’s mind before touching his arm to signal to him that they must move on, but Will does not budge.

“Will,” Hannibal steps closer to assess the look in Will’s eyes. They’re panicked. He knows what comes next.

“Alone in the parking lot. No, not alone.” He says under his breath. His eyes rove across Casson’s features. “I go for my gun, but…”

“Will.” Hannibal braces a steady hand on Will’s shoulder and his other on Will’s clavicle so Will is wrapped up in Hannibal like a blanket. He can feel his pulse jack-hammering under his fingers.

“Dr. Lecter?” Jack calls over Hannibal’s shoulder. Hannibal spares him a glance before Will convulses violently against him. He holds on tight enough to keep Will from collapsing when his legs give out. He guides Will’s twitching body in a controlled fall so that Will is in a sitting position on the floor beside him. Hannibal’s props his right leg up against Will’s back. The other he bends over Will’s knees until he can situate him on his side without dropping him.

Shocks of energy course through Will’s muscles. The convulsions pulsate like internal explosions under the surface of his skin. His head jerks against Hannibal’s chest, and the yell that tears straight out of his lungs is tortured and agonized, confused. The back of his head knocks into Hannibal’s chin. Jack is shouting at the patrons waiting to view the body to step back.

“Here, his head.” Beverly Katz runs around Will’s other side to help maneuver Will onto his back. She is calm, and her hands are steady where they help prop up the knee closest to her and farthest from Hannibal. He tugs Will’s left arm and leg so his body rotates a little, and the limbs stay in place where they are laid flat against the pristine floorboards. Katz’s breath catches in her throat a few times as she murmurs encouragingly to Will. “You’re all right, Will. You’re gonna be okay. It’s okay.”

Hannibal pulls Will’s right arm across his chest, and together they roll Will onto his left side. Hannibal stays crouched in front of Will, measuring his pulse with two fingers pressed to his wrist. Katz drops into a sitting position and rubs Will’s back as much to comfort him as to comfort herself. She holds the back of her other hand to her mouth. Hannibal can hear her heart racing in her chest.

“Is he going to be okay?” Jack takes a cautious step closer. Hannibal and Katz look up at the same time to find the room cleared and silent but for the rustling of Will’s clothes when he jerks minutely. The doors have been closed; the lid to Casson’s casket as well.

“He will be.” Hannibal says, dropping his gaze to meet with Katz’s. “It will pass.”

She nods once, firmly. Her eyes are determined and steadfast. She is a brave woman. She will not back down.

“I think he’s coming out of it.” Katz murmurs. She pats Will softly on the back. Hannibal moves his hand from Will’s wrist to take his hand and squeeze as Will stirs to wakefulness.

“Will,” Hannibal thumbs Will’s forehead with his other hand, letting his fingers comb through Will’s curls soothingly.

“Hm, I’m…” Will’s brow furrows as he turns slightly to lie on his back. “Hann…?” He opens his eyes. “Oh, hi, Katz.” She sighs, and it takes on the sound of a relieved laugh.

“Hi, Will.” Her voice is gentle and fond.

“I think it would be best if he were not to attend the funeral, Jack.” Hannibal says without looking away from Will. The sound of his voice distracts Will from his halfhearted attempt to converse with Katz. He turns his head and smiles lazily.

“Hello, Will.”

“Hey, doc.” He closes his eyes but does not turn his face away. “Wha’ ‘appened? Where’s everyone?” His tongue sounds thick in his mouth. Hannibal takes his hand from Will’s forehead to press on both sides of Will’s jaw and checks to see if he bit anything. The inside of his cheek is bloody, but his tongue is unharmed. “’S wrong?” Will slurs, weakly squeezing Hannibal’s fingers against his palm.

“You had a seizure, Will.” Hannibal brushes his fingers through Will’s hair again, wary of the two sets of eyes on him. He throws his caution to the wind in favor of comforting Will.

Will hums and turns his face so his forehead presses into the palm of Hannibal’s hand. He is unself-conscious and uncharacteristically audacious for his exhaustion. Will begins to slip into a sleep when Katz pushes to her feet and tells Jack she will be back with a mop for Will’s lost bladder. Hannibal watches her go, and the look on Jack’s face tells him that while she may be going for a mop, she will not be back straight away.

Hannibal finds it distasteful, even for Jack, to leave Will passed out in his own filth just so he may have a word with Hannibal. He says as much.

“Speak your piece, Jack. However, I must insist that we move Will and get him cleaned up.”

“Is that something he would be comfortable with, you cleaning him up?”

“I am still his doctor, Jack.”

“Not that kind of doctor.”

“What other kind is there?” Hannibal lets some of his annoyance filter through, enough to show Jack that he not exempt from the bias of subjectivity often associated with loved ones and their health. He must be careful to display as much clinical objectivity in his treatment of Will's current condition. Jack must see him both as emotionally invested in Will's interests but also as having trustworthy judgment when it comes to administering to Will in a professional capacity.

Jack is stuck. Hannibal is both a trained physician and a certified psychiatrist. He knows cells and chromosomes just as well as he knows personality disorders and social phobias. He is as well-versed in the brain and biology as he is in the mind and the DSMV.

“Are you romantically involved with Will Graham, Dr. Lecter?” Hannibal takes a deep breath and stands to his feet, though he is reluctant to leave Will down there on his own in case he wakes.

“Yes, Jack.” The directness of his answer surprises Jack. He blinks.

“Okay.” He nods, rubbing at his forehead with the heel of his hand. “Okay then. What do you want me to do, doctor?”

“About what, Jack?”

“You’re *screwing your patient.*” He raises his voice. A door closes abruptly. Neither Hannibal nor Jack look up to acknowledge the sound or the person behind it.

“Will and I have not had sex.” Jack sputters, whether it is because he wrongfully accused Hannibal of violating ethics laws or because he does not want to think of Will in that context, Hannibal has no interest in finding out. “You asked if we were romantically involved. We are.”

“You can’t continue to see him.” Jack says it like it is an obvious condition of their professional relationship. It really isn’t.

“Will is not my patient, not officially. We have discussed this before, Jack.” He watches closely as the recognition flashes through his eyes resentfully. “You have gone to great measures to keep our visits off the record. Will’s time with me, while we have never abused it, virtually never happened. I tell you everything you want to know about him. We have no confidences from you; if you wish to discuss ethics, we could begin there.”

"You work together." Jack tries.

"Would you have this same argument with, say, Alana Bloom?"

"What does that have to do with anything?" Jack grows defensive.

"She is a woman. I am a man."

"Are you accusing me of discriminating against you based on your sexuality, Dr. Lecter?"

"You accused me of abusing my professional relationship with Will to seduce him. I know very little of what else you might think of me."

“All right.” Jack raises his palms in defeat, not liking the turn of the tables. “You shall not be moved. I got it.” Hannibal kneels again at Will’s side.

“Would you mind retrieving that mop, Jack? I believe Ms. Katz was about to bring it in when you slandered my name.” Jack’s face flushes, and his nostrils flare. He storms out of the room, not accustomed to losing in fistfights he has initiated. He has some deep-seated problem with Hannibal taking to Will in this way. If it is an alpha-male response to homosexuality, it is not worth dwelling on. Hypermasculinity certainly is a plague and not an interesting one.

He hoists Will's arm over his shoulder and lifts him to his feet when Katz returns without Jack in tow. Mitchel is carrying the mop two steps behind her.

"You guys can go through that door." Mitchel points. He sneaks a glance at Katz as she steps around the puddle of urine to open the door to the morgue for Hannibal. She holds it as he passes through with Will and offers to help Hannibal carry him the rest of the way, but he politely refuses. She stands in the doorway even after he lifts Will onto a chrome-colored table with drains built into it.

He turns to look at her, and there is an uncomfortable expression on her face. She sighs and walks into the room, pushing the door closed behind her without turning the handle so it remains opened a crack. It is not deliberate.

"Jack's just worried about Will." She says, and the words are unhurried, but they carry an urgent message. "It's not because you're both men or even because you work together. Honestly, I think he was just surprised and didn't know how to handle it." She looks down at Will, and Hannibal can tell she cares very much for him.

"Thank you for your honesty." Hannibal says as he removes his jacket and folds it over a steel rack on the other side of the table. "Very proper of you."

"Well, Will's my friend. If he's with you, I've gotta make some kind of effort."

"It is much appreciated." Hannibal smiles, and she smiles small in return. She turns to leave but then stops.

"Have you ever seen this happen to him before? I mean, that seizure was…"

"This is the first time I believe it has ever happened." She nods slowly. "Beverly," Hannibal approaches her. "I will take care of him." She studies him for a moment, really thinking about whether he can be trusted. He knows the moment she decides that he can be.

"Yeah, I think you will. Do you have his room key? I'll bring back some clothes for him to change into."

Hannibal reaches into his pocket and produces a card key. The action makes her smile inexplicably.

She turns without offering an explanation and leaves the room as quickly and quietly as she entered. She pulls the door all the way shut behind her. Hannibal waits for the footsteps to fade away before locking the doors at both entrances on either side of the room. He returns to Will and rolls up his sleeves. He carefully removes Will's belt and deposits it in a small silver basin propped up on a stand beside the table. Will's shoes come off next followed by his socks. They have soaked up some fluid, but they will wash clean.

He removes the wallet from Will's pocket and undoes his pants with clinical efficiency, peeling them away from his thighs slowly. The pungent aroma of urine wafts up as Hannibal rolls the wet cotton-polyester fabric all the way down Will's legs and balls them into a loose heap before dumping them in the trash receptacle on the floor.

Will is left in his shirt and boxers. The hem of the shirt is wet where he thrashed in the puddle of urine before Hannibal and Katz could situate him properly on his side. He takes that off, too. Will's limbs are heavy with sleep, yet they feel almost pliant in Hannibal's hands. Will's chest is pale against the shiny table. Under direct lighting, he almost looks dead. He is even lying on a table designed to conveniently drain corpses. He is perfectly still but for his shallow even breaths.

He brushes Will's hair back from his forehead with the outside of his wrist where he has not touched Will's soiled clothes. The bruise on his neck is beginning to yellow around the edges. The telling shape of Hannibal's fingers are blurring. He leans down and takes his tongue from the base of Will's throat to the center of the fading handprint, his handprint. Will is deeply asleep, but there is no telling how long it will last or what it will take to wake him. Hannibal would like to finish washing and dressing Will before he comes around again, but he suspects Will might wake just to make things difficult.

Hannibal removes Will's boxers, lifting his hips off the table so that the item of clothing slips underneath and comes right off. Hannibal will buy Will a new wardrobe when they come to that point in their relationship.

He tosses the drenched material into the bin with Will's pants and shirt and then rounds the table to wash his hands in the sink. There is a glass wash basin in one of the cabinets. He fills it with warm water.

With two clean dry towels and a large container of sanitary wipes piled in one arm, he takes the basin with his free hand and returns to Will's side. He sets the basin and the wipes on a table behind him with one of the towels. He dunks the towel into the water and squeezes out the excess water. He holds it over Will's hips and fully wrings it out, watching with interest how Will's skin prickles beneath the water. It is a sweet thought, Will being this sensitive to touch.

Hannibal scrubs lightly across Will's hips, purposely avoiding his penis where it lays limp against Will's thigh. He follows down to Will's ankle before dunking the towel in the basin again. He repeats the action on Will's left leg, and the man flinches away from Hannibal's hands where they press into his flesh through the thick wet towel.

"Whoa, Hannibal, why am I…" Will clambers back awkwardly on the small rectangle of a table and nearly sends himself tumbling over the side. It is a well-built piece of furniture. It does not wobble at Will's clumsy movements. "I'm naked."

"You are."

"How did I get…why am I naked? Are you *washing* me?"

"Do you recall your seizure, Will?"

"I…Oh." He looks around Hannibal at his soiled clothes in the bin. He pulls his knees to his chest and brings his arms around them.

"You may do it yourself if you wish." Hannibal hands him the towel, and Will takes it.

“Turn around.”

Hannibal does, as incongruous as the request seems at this point. He understands Will’s desire for modesty as they have not yet been intimate without clothes separating their bodies to a degree. Hannibal washes his hands in the sink and takes his time drying them. He sees Will stretching for the wipes on the table where the container is just out of reach. Hannibal leans back against the counter and waits for Will to drop his head in frustration and ask for help. It takes a moment.

He struggles with getting his legs over the edge of the table before trying to reach the floor with his feet to find the table is too high to make it without jumping. Hannibal supposes he does not trust his legs not to buckle at the impact. It is a wise choice. Will brings his legs back up and scratches at his forehead.

“Could you hand me the wipes?” Hannibal pushes off the counter with a small teasing smile on his lips.

“Here you are, Will.” He stands beside Will and hands him the plastic container.

“Thanks.”

He starts at the knock on the other side of the door and almost drops the wipes.

“Clothes, Dr. Lecter.” Katz calls from the other side of the door. Hannibal waits until he hears the doors outside click closed before he opens the door and picks up the clean folded items of clothing: one pair of tan pants, a plaid button-up, and clean undergarments, socks included. With a quick scan of the area he sees that the casket has been removed and the floor has been mopped clean. The spotless floor catches the sunlight through the window in a sharp glare.

Will flounders to cover himself when Hannibal faces him with the clothes in hand. He locks the door behind him, and Will averts his eyes.

“I have seen you, Will. You need not hide.” He says softly, setting the clothes on the table beside the remaining clean towel. He takes the dirtied towel and the basin of yellowed water to the sink. He runs the hot water for a moment and finds a brillo pad under the sink. He scrubs the basin for a count of sixty seconds before depositing it in a drawer for dirty wash basins so it may be properly cleaned later.

He presses the sopping wet towel into the walls of the sink to wring out as much water as he can before tossing it into a hamper with the other used towels to be laundered. He repeats the action with Will’s sullied clothes. After he has washed and dried his hands again, he finds Will still scrubbing at his thighs with the sanitary wipes.

“It will help if you stand.” Hannibal comes to stand beside him again. He offers his arm, and Will takes it, though the frown on his face suggests he is unhappy about it. He slips two cautious, shaking feet off the table and drops down with no warning. Will collides with Hannibal’s front, one arm held behind him on the edge of the table for support, though he is pressed fully against Hannibal. Will's hair brushes Hannibal's forehead. Neither of them speaks or moves until Will has his legs beneath him.

Hannibal steps back to reach for the towel on the table. He hands it to Will, and he rubs it across his thighs and behind himself with one hand. He has Hannibal's sleeve clenched in the other. Hannibal holds him underneath his armpits; his eyes track no lower than Will's collar bone.

"It's been a long time since I've needed a sponge bath." Will snorts derisively. He drops the towel and swears.

They stare at the towel, and then they stare at each other. Will chuckles, taking off his glasses with one hand so he can scour the sweat beaded across his brow with the back of that same hand. His laugh takes on a hysterical note. Hannibal brings Will closer when his peals of laughter disintegrate into quiet, humiliated sobs.

"Why would you want me?" Will mutters, kicking uselessly at the towel on the floor and throwing himself further off balance. Hannibal shifts his hands so they hold Will around his shoulders and back in a tight embrace. He kisses the crown of Will's head, tastes sweat and traces of disinfectant where Will raked his fingers across his scalp after handling the sanitary wipes.

"I told you, Will. You are more than your fear. You have the power to be whatever you choose to be."

"It doesn't feel that way to me."

"It will." He takes one hand from around Will to touch the jut of Will's cheek bone. Will closes his eyes and ducks his head away from Hannibal. "Do you trust me, Will?"

"Yes." Will sighs, burying his face in Hannibal's shoulder. Hannibal takes Will's hips in his hands and squeezes, pressing an open-mouthed kiss against Will's ear.

"Do you?" Will nods, brushing his forehead along Hannibal's collar bone. He runs his hands up Hannibal's sides, wraps his arms around Hannibal's waist, and holds on tightly to Hannibal's back to return Hannibal's embrace. Hannibal allows it for a few long moments and then drops slowly to his knees. Will's hands follow him until he lands, causing them to migrate up Hannibal's back until they rest on his shoulders. His fingers tighten around Hannibal's shirt and pinch at the skin underneath.

"What are you doing?" Will shakes his head and tries to step back, only to find that Hannibal has trapped him between his body and the table he was just on. "No, Hann—" Will's breath hitches and turns into a moan. He plumps immediately under Hannibal's tongue. He takes up the discarded towel and flicks in around the backs of Will's knees and runs his hands up Will's thighs until each of his cheeks are firmly held in the palms of his hands. He runs the towel back down, dipping down lightly into the crevice in between just for good measure.

"Do you think I get on my knees for anyone, Will?" He puffs his breath against Will's penis before moving to kiss each of Will's hips. He noses at the first suggestions of dark pubic hair beneath his navel; they are wiry from the recent wash and smell of soap, warm tap water, and rubbing alcohol. Hannibal dries the backs of his thighs once more before dropping the towel and holding Will with his bare hands. His hips twitch in spite of himself. He shakes his head

vigorously, already desperate for release, though he can barely stand. Hannibal can feel his legs tremble with the effort of holding his body upright.

“No, not for anyone.”

“I am on my knees for you, Will.” Will groans, fisting Hannibal’s hair in his fingers. They tremble, too. Will does not have the strength for this. “Come here.” Will sinks to his knees, worn ragged from the past few days he has had. Hannibal pulls him into his lap. Will lays his head on Hannibal’s shoulder, more because he has no energy left to hold his head up than because he craves this intimacy from Hannibal. He has no doubt, though, that Will does, in fact, crave it.

“I will cook dinner for you on Saturday night, and I will show you why I want you.” Will kisses him, the heat already dissipated; the desire remains full and heavy within him. Hannibal can feel his heartbeat through his back where he holds Will in place with one hand. It beats quickly and unevenly. “I will show you everything.”

“Are you asking me out on a date?” Will breathes. He is tired.

“Yes.”

“I accept.”

“Thank you.” Hannibal smiles into his hair.

“I should probably get dressed.” He sighs, pushing himself up with Hannibal’s shoulders. Hannibal kisses Will’s face softly when their cheeks brush. Will melts at the sensation; Hannibal feels it, too; warmth in his stomach. “Or we could stay here.” His arms are loose and weak where they snake around Hannibal’s neck. He brushes his fingers along the ends of hair at the nape of Hannibal’s neck. “I am naked.”

“Unfortunately, I must insist on returning you to your room. We would not be good company to misuse the Vogts' professional space.” Hannibal reaches up to pluck Will’s clean shirt off the table and bring it down in between their bodies. “We will start with this.”

Will slips his left arm into the long sleeve of the shirt and waits for Hannibal to pull the other half across his shoulders so he can slip his other arm into the hole. His chest presses accidentally into Hannibal’s. He kisses Will’s forehead when his eyes fall shut. Will bites his lip.

“We’re actually going to have dinner tomorrow, right?”

“What else did you have in mind?”

“And there you go, asking questions you already know the answer to.” Hannibal hides his smile.

“I will not simply ravish you once you are in my home, Will.” Hannibal takes Will’s hands away where they are pinching uselessly at the buttons of his shirt. Will places his hands on Hannibal’s shoulders and lets him take care of buttoning up the shirt. He is quick with the

task. He buttons the very last button just to catalog Will's scrunched nose. Their fingers brush when they both go to undo it at the same time. Hannibal beats him to it, but Will does not remove his hand. He takes the blade of Hannibal's hand in his and lifts it to his lips to kiss every knuckle.

"How do you do that?" His breath is warm against Hannibal's fingers

"Do what, Will?" Hannibal murmurs, scrunching the hair at the back of Will's head in the fingers of his free hand.

"You radiate this…" Will swoons. Hannibal squeezes his fingers against Will's. His eyes fall shut and he presses his forehead to Hannibal's, dropping their hands to his leg. Their fingers are wound together. "You're so calm. How do you do it?" He whispers. Hannibal tightens his hold around the back of Will's neck and brings their mouths together. Will shivers.

"What does it feel like to you?"

"Like sunlight and a cool breeze; like warmth and relief." They share breath for a moment more before Hannibal reaches up for the rest of Will's clothes.

"Here, Will."

"So evasive." Will smiles tiredly, shuffling into his briefs without crawling out of Hannibal's lap. Hannibal lifts him with one hand under Will's thigh and the other pressed against Will's ribs so he can pull the pale blue shorts up all the way around his thighs. To get his pants on Will does have to stand. Hannibal helps him to his feet and steadies his shoulders as Will works his legs into the tan pants. Will sighs and leans against the table. He will sleep easily when they return to the hotel. Hannibal leaves Will's side for a moment to unlock the doors. Will pulls on his socks and shoes. Hannibal laces their fingers together when they are reunited at the backdoor.

"But Jack." Will says worriedly, cringing away from the door.

"He knows."

"What?" Will takes his hand away. Something pinches unpleasantly in Hannibal's chest.

"I was somewhat intimate in my handling of you during the course of your seizure. He confronted me." Will blinks, eyes searching his memory and finding it. Distracted with his thoughts, he brushes his fingers across his forehead, a reflection of Hannibal in his mind.

"Oh." Will's face and neck flash scarlet. "What did he say?" His voice is gentle, apologetic. Hannibal recombines their fingers. Will relaxes.

"A lot of things." Will worries his lip with his teeth. "But he is going to leave us be."

"But what did he *say?*"

"That I could not see you anymore." Will's mouth drops open. "Naturally, I refused."

“You refused.” Will laughs, running his free hand across his mouth and down his chin. The hand tracks up into Will’s hair where it pulls discretely at the roots. Hannibal eases it with his fingers on Will’s wrist and holds that hand in his as well.

“What did I tell you before, Will?” His tone is chastising.

“That he’s…going to leave us be?” Will is confused.

“Yes, and that holds true.” He watches Will expectantly.

“Um, self-harm is discouraged.” Will looks down, remembering. “You wouldn’t condone it.”

“I would not, no.” He kisses Will’s lips and his cheek and his hair. “I would not see you needlessly hurt.”

“Thanks.” Will says after a moment, squeezing Hannibal’s hands in his. “Thank you.” His eyes blink a few times and Hannibal releases one of his hands and turns them back toward the exit.

“Never thank me for taking care of you.”

“Thank you for seeing me.” Will’s voice is low and quiet. There is a storm veiled within it. He only hides what is natural for him to hide; the rest he is allowing Hannibal to observe and commit to memory. His eyes are bright, though darkness clings to its edges. Hannibal has seen it now. He knows how to reach it.

“Always, Will.” Hannibal’s smile is soft, light. It reveals the barest warmth of his happiness. That one spark lights a fire in Will, and the smile that breaks open across his face is sweeter than the finest wine.

“Let’s go.” He nods at the door, and Hannibal opens it. They walk around the side of the building. The funeral procession has already left for the cemetery. They reach the parking lot to find Mitchel polishing a black hearse he presumably drove Casson’s body to the cemetery in. He looks up when he hears their footfalls on the pavement, and his eyes stop at their connected hands. He straightens out quickly, a small smile lining his thin mouth.

“Glad to see you’re better, Mr. Graham.” Will nods his head.

“Thanks. Sorry about, you know.”

“I prefer urine to embalming fluid any day of the week.” He shrugs then wrinkles his nose. “Well, that sounds weird.” Will laughs and allows Hannibal to tug him in the right direction again. “You guys have a safe trip tomorrow. I'll drop off his clothes after we run the wash tonight.”

“Thank you." Hannibal says. "Give our regards to your brother.” Mitchel nods, the smile more evident now on his lips. Hannibal leads Will to the rental car parked on the edge of the lot. Mitchel goes back to shining the already immaculate hood of the hearse. Will slinks into his seat, and Hannibal presses the door shut. He waves once to Mitchel who returns it with a

polite flick of his wrist. Hannibal can see the black smudges of polish on his pale wrist and the tattoo edging out from beneath his rolled up sleeve. It is a snake on an anchor.

Will is already drifting off at his right. Hannibal smiles at the apropos irony of the friends they have made and starts the car.

The Spy

Chapter Summary

> The boys go home, feat. one Abigail Hobbs and a jar of pumpkin seeds among other things.

Chapter Notes

> *I’m a spy in the house of love/I know the dream that you're dreamin' of/I know the word that you long to hear/I know your deepest, secret fear/I know your deepest, secret fear/I know your deepest, secret fear/I'm a spy, I can see/What you do/And I know*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will rolls out of bed early on Saturday morning to take a shower and carry his tiny suitcase down the elevator to one. He looks like hell; he knows he does. He’s been tossing and turning uselessly for the past five hours without results.

It’s about four in the morning when he gets to the lobby on the ground floor and fixes himself a cup of instant coffee. It tastes like dirty water now that he’s been spoiled on coffee house espressos and handmade beverages of an even higher caliber at Hannibal’s house.

Hannibal’s house. Dinner, tonight.

The thought wakes him up a bit, though he still feels like he’s been hit by a bus. He sets his suitcase on the floor in front of his chair and reclines back with his feet propped up on the handle. He sits for ten minutes before he starts to sweat, thinking for the second time this week that he’s been abandoned in Williamsport, Pennsylvania.

Price finds him eventually, looking just as worn out as Will feels. His relief wars with his guilt.

They acknowledge each other, vaguely. Price is a nice guy, but he doesn’t dive into conversation without being given a lead to work with. In the absence of that lead, they sit together in a comfortable silence. Will looks over a few times to confirm that Price is nodding off in his chair. Will is beginning to go that same way but in doing so, spills coffee on his leg. What it lacks in flavor it makes up for with heat.

This is the second time he’s lost a fight with his coffee in this hotel. He’d laugh at himself if he weren’t so exhausted. As it is, he barely even registers the feel of the coffee stinging his

leg and then cooling on his pants. It's just a splotch on his knee, nothing too incriminating.

Zeller walks in all bravado at four thirty. He drums on Price's shoulders and mimics a fanfare.

"Go away, Brian." Price swats at him with a rolled up magazine over his shoulder. It narrowly misses Zeller's face.

"Jesus, you guys look like zombies." He sits down beside Price and takes the magazine Price is still holding warily like a baton. "What's your excuse, Price?" Will is equal parts embarrassed and glad Zeller doesn't mention the incident at the wake. Somehow being excluded makes what happened feel that much more obvious and awful.

The shame he associates with the seizure is a phantom limb growing ever more inflamed by his empathy. Katz hugged him when she found him creeping out of his room last night for a bite to eat. Now Zeller's stepping around the issue altogether, probably out of respect for Will, to be fair. He can see that they're just trying to handle what happened with as much finesse and caution as possible. The finesse isn't the problem. Will objects to the caution.

Even Alana had sent him a carefully worded text message about the funeral. She invited him to her session with Abigail today and said, pointedly, he thinks, that Hannibal could come, too.

Hannibal's house. Dinner tonight.

"You and that Denny's waitress? Oh, man." Will blinks to find Zeller and Price several exchanges into a conversation. Price looks resigned to the gossip; Zeller looks intrigued. "What's her name, Dolores?"

"Dorothy." Price corrects. "She's a nice girl."

"Apparently." Zeller grins.

"No, nothing happened." Price waves his hand. "You misunderstand. She's a lesbian." Zeller's face drops.

"What?"

"She's sexually attracted to women."

"No, you—Smart ass. I mean, what do you mean? Why'd you go out with her if you didn't have a shot with her?"

"I'm allowed to make friends, Zeller."

"You met her two days ago, and now we're leaving. What's the point?"

"She was interesting." He shrugs. "She drank me under the table; her and her partner, um," Price pinches the bridge of his nose and thinks with his eyes closed. "Kira, yeah. It was a nice

time.” He yawns. Will realizes now that he’s hung-over, and that’s why he looks like he’s been through the wringer.

“Why didn’t you call me?” Zeller pouts a little bit, and Price scoffs.

“I *asked* you to go. Ten thirty last night, I said I was going out. You were all tucked in for bed.”

“Guys, I don’t think Will signed up to be your couples’ counselor.” Katz waltzes into their wide rectangle of chairs. She looks wakeful and ready to go. It’s a quarter to five, fifteen minutes before they head out. Will looks around for Hannibal and doesn’t see him. He wonders if he left already. Zeller makes a noise, and Price smiles.

“He’s just a better listener. I can’t help it.” Price sighs dramatically. Will shakes his head, not knowing how the hell he got roped into this.

“I *listen* to you, you jerk.” Katz laughs.

“Okay, guys, really. Use your inside voices.” Price instantly looks tired again once the banter stops. Will blinks down into the dark brown liquid gone cold in his cup. He stands and dumps it and refills it with a different thermos. It tastes marginally better, though it still really doesn’t compare to Hannibal’s. Nothing really can compare with Hannibal or the things he does when Will thinks about it.

Will has been thinking about it since he woke up yesterday at eight o’ clock and went looking drunkenly for food. He’d only had to contend with Katz as everyone else had gone out to eat. When asked, she couldn’t tell him where. After the obligatory hug and pep talk combo that seemed only slightly out of character for her, she let him creep around the area in peace to scavenge bagels and crackers from the kitchen while she flirted with one of the younger, hopelessly embarrassed employees.

In that time, he’d thought about Hannibal; Hannibal’s hands on his body through the towel, touching him and burning him in the best way; Hannibal’s shoulders strong and muscled where he held him when the man dropped to his knees. He didn’t think he’d ever see Hannibal like that. He didn’t think it was possible.

“I am on my knees for you, Will.”

There’s an exhilarating power to be had with that. Will wants to explore it further when Hannibal lets him—*tonight, we’re having dinner tonight.*

The prospect of an intimate meal with Hannibal becomes increasingly unnerving the more Will thinks about it. Hannibal has all but promised to take him to bed. He hadn’t even hinted at sex, but it was a given. Hannibal is a gentleman; he wouldn’t have flaunted that Will is basically a sure thing. He is a sure thing. Hannibal knows he is. Will wants to be irritated, but he’s only anxious, impatient, and turned on more than he cares to admit.

He wants Hannibal; wants him. It’s as simple as that, and it’s worlds more complex than that.

Hannibal sees Will; sees inside of him and understands him. He doesn't try to fix him; he doesn't try to change him. He takes him for what he is, and he does everything he can to show Will that what he is can be enough, can be *more* than enough, even.

He looks up when he thinks he hears Katz call his name, but the scene has shifted. At first he thinks he's in the woods behind his house again, but it looks different. It might be the wooded area behind what used to be the Hobbs' house. It could be an imagined composite; he really doesn't know. The only thing he does know is he's not alone here. His mind wouldn't have brought him here if not to reunite him with an old face, with the stag.

"I wondered where you were."

"Jack and I went for coffee. This one is yours if you would like it."

The image of the stag before him ripples, vaulting the darkness into pulses of bright light where the reality of the hotel is trying to encroach upon his space with the stag. He doesn't know if it's him shutting the world out or the stag. He doesn't know where the lines are that separate them. In his mind he can only see the stag and his hand where it touches the beast on its wide neck. He doesn't remember reaching out.

"I want everything you can give me." Will murmurs, burying his face in the animal's pelt. It smells of the earth and of smoke and of rain. It smells vaguely like Sangiovese wine.

"Will?"

He feels antlers touching his face when the animal turns its head to the side so it may look upon him. He runs his fingers along the tines and feels the soft hairs lining the growths. There is no pull in him telling him to break them this time. He has already passed that test.

"What's next?"

"Will."

His eyes open to a deep green vest. His cheek is pressed into the silky material. He's still sitting in his chair, but he's leaned over the arm so his face lines up with Hannibal's stomach. His hand is on the back of Will's head, thumb brushing against the patch of flesh behind his ear. Will is cradling Hannibal's wrist in his fingers.

He jerks away, sparing only a moment's thought to his coffee. He sees it on the end table beside his chair. Hannibal thought to remove it from his hands before trying to wake him.

"Was I asleep?" Will shuffles to his feet self-consciously. Katz, Zeller, and Price have migrated outside. He can see Price through the glass of the door, rubbing his eyes. The sky has tinted the sidewalk at their feet pale blue with the rising sun. He wonders how long ago they left, how much they saw. He fidgets with his jacket zipper, alight now with an embarrassment that energizes his body but does nothing for the noise in his head.

Hannibal catches Will's shoulders in his hands, and heat courses through Will. He imagines Hannibal pushing him down to his knees. He imagines Hannibal's words flowing graciously

from his own lips, *"I am on my knees for you."*

"Your eyes were open. Do you recall what you said?"

"Um," Will pats his hands down his shirt where it shows through between the halves of his unzipped jacket. "That depends on what I said, I guess."

"You said, what's next?" Hannibal buttons his suit jacket, and Will realizes with a flush that he must have undone it.

"Is that all I said?"

"Yes." Will studies him, but he doesn't know what Hannibal looks like when he's lying. He's willing to accept it even if it's not true. "Did you dream of the stag?" Will nods. Hannibal gives him a questioning look.

"No, he didn't kill me this time."

"I would call that an improvement if I knew more about what it represented to you."

"You said it was my internalized response to being in the field." Will paraphrases, checking his watch and taking up his suitcase. Hannibal catches his arm when he starts to walk.

"Your coffee, Will." He presses the cup into his hand. Will doesn't recognize the name of the coffeehouse on the modest cup; it's artisanal. It tastes rich and smooth.

"Thanks." He starts to walk again when Hannibal does. His hand stays on Will's arm. He doesn't mind it much, if at all. Hannibal still radiates tranquility. It's more than anyone else has been able to give him in the past. It's more than he's ever hoped anyone could. "Where's your stuff?"

"In the car. I thought we might ride together to the airport."

Will doesn't reply. He doesn't need to.

The air outside is cold but rejuvenating in the chill it carries with the breeze. Hannibal's hand on him is warm even through the sleeves of his shirt and jacket. Will is hyper aware of their surroundings and self-conscious of the forwardness of their display, but Hannibal feels good enough that he lets it slip away to bother someone else for a change. Hannibal's calm makes letting go of his stress easier. Jack approaches them, and Hannibal's fingers do not tighten or relax on Will's arm. They hold perfectly steady.

"Morning, Will." His eyes stay on Will's face.

"Jack."

"I spoke with Dr. Lecter about our seating arrangements; he said I'd need to run it by you, but I thought we'd benefit from switching seats."

"I'm highly offended." Zeller interjects. "I am a delight to sit with." Katz rolls her eyes.

“You see what I’m working with here?” Will looks at Hannibal, at the tight set of his jaw that only looks relaxed.

“Yeah, I see just fine.”

Will adjusts his grip on his suitcase when Jack walks off with the others down the sidewalk to the lot behind the hotel. Jack and the team will carpool to the airport. Hannibal and Will take their time on the walk to the Sentra.

“You did not expressly give Jack permission to switch seats with you.” Hannibal observes when their car passes them. Will drinks his coffee.

“Jack is going to do whatever he wants.” He stops when Hannibal does. The car is still a ways off. The hotel obscures the view from the street, and as far as he can tell, they are in a blind spot for all six cameras in the lot. They’re alone. The spark in his gut is something like fear but much warmer, more coherent. It pools inside of him and only grows deeper and headier when Hannibal stares at him.

He knows it’s desire. Hannibal pushes him into the wall just hard enough to get Will’s back against it and holds him there. Will suitcase clatters to the ground, and he angles his head so Hannibal can kiss him. He noses at Will’s hair instead. He inhales deeply and presses lips to the shell of Will’s ear. Will smiles. The action has become familiar enough by now that he can’t be bothered to summon up the energy to pretend he doesn’t like it.

“You used to be a little more discreet about scenting me.”

“I have no reason to hide it from you anymore.” Hannibal breathes, taking the cartilage of Will’s ear between his teeth and licking the sensitive flesh. Will winds his left arm around Hannibal’s neck. He holds the coffee off to the side.

“No.” Will bites the pulse beating in Hannibal’s neck. The hitch in his breath is subtle, but they’re so close Will can’t not hear it. They’re practically one being. The sound of it trembles in Will’s ear drums. It boils his blood. “You said you’d show me everything.”

“I will.” Hannibal smiles against his ear. He kisses Will’s cheek before pulling back slightly. “Tonight.”

“Tonight’s the night.” Will murmurs, curling his fingers into Hannibal’s hair. Hannibal tilts back into his hand, and that is subtle, too. The way he licks his lips is not.

“Tonight’s the night.” Hannibal repeats, leaning in to capture Will’s lips in a soft kiss that Will moans into. Hannibal breaks away from him and leans down to take up Will’s suitcase. “Come, Will.” Will shivers and follows him to the car.

On the connecting flight out of Williamsport, Will takes Jack’s seat in between Alana and Zeller. Zeller spends the time talking with Price in the row ahead of them and earns many disapproving looks that get to be too much for Will after about ten minutes. The woman sitting to Zeller’s right is especially livid, for whatever reason. The frustration emanating from her sets Will’s teeth on edge. It’s hot and thick like steam. A few times he thinks her

words are his. Alana asks him if he's going to be sick when he puts his fingers to his mouth. Talking to her helps him ignore the oppressive atmosphere settling in around him.

For his lack of foresight, he had packed his headphones in his suitcase the night before, thinking he would be too busy sleeping to need them. He usually listened to music on long flights, but half the trip home would just be waiting in the Philadelphia airport for the flight to Richmond. It didn't seem like he'd need the distraction, especially since the Preston case, and everything else that happened, had worn him pretty much ragged.

Zeller starts up a new conversation with Price about Pekka Nuorteva's article on Parnassius apollo depopulation in Finland, and the woman scowls at Zeller. Will really doesn't understand her frustration. It's not exactly quiet on the plane. They've been in the air for about twenty minutes. She only has to put up with it for another thirty before they land at PHL.

Alana catches onto his problem quickly. She hands him her iPod when she sees that the book he's trying to read isn't cutting it. She's smart, and she knows the PG version of what ails him. He scrolls through the library, skeptical but appreciative of the gesture. His finger stalls on the screen when he sees Kind of Blue in her albums.

She smiles at his selection when he puts the ear buds in and leans back in the seat. He hears the trumpet and saxophones and timpani, and it's beautiful because there are no words or ulterior meanings; it's just music. Will closes his eyes. Thirty minutes comes and goes, and Alana has to wake him when they land.

He sits with Hannibal in the noisy terminal at PHL when they get into Philadelphia at 8:00 and eats a sub sandwich. Hannibal is quiet and pristine beside him. Will is sure he looks homeless with his coffee-stained pants and messy hair. It doesn't help that he's starving, so he gets crumbs on his face in the throes of his hunger. Hannibal doesn't seem to notice Will's state or the curious eyes that gloss over him and linger judgmentally on Will.

Every pair of eyes on him is a slice with a razor blade. He swallows his food and clears his throat before speaking to Hannibal.

"Alana invited us to go see Abigail today."

"Very kind of her."

"Do you want to go? I know we have plans…"

"I would like to see Abigail." Hannibal smiles. "You may ride with me to Baltimore if you wish."

"I need to stop at home first."

"Of course."

Will finishes his sandwich as soon as the matter is closed. He brushes the crumbs off his pants and wipes at his face with a napkin. When he looks up at Hannibal, he looks

entertained. He'll take that over disgusted any day, but he's fully prepared to make a snarky comment.

Hannibal thumbs at a spot on Will's cheek, absurdly high for him to have gotten food there. He starts when Hannibal leans in and presses his open mouth to Will's chin, his tongue presses against the skin once with intent. He wonders if it's mustard or mayonnaise. Hannibal straightens out enough to press his lips to Will's mouth, and their tongues flick against each other three times. It was mustard.

The people frequenting their area don't look at them anymore. Will smirks down at his lap.

Twenty minutes before they have to board the plane, Will retrieves his headphones from his suitcase and switches them out for the book he carried on with him from Williamsport. He and Hannibal part ways at the gate. Will takes Price's seat this time around, and he doesn't check to see if that makes the woman sitting beside Zeller any happier. He has his music now, so it doesn't matter what she feels.

They get in to Richmond at 10:45 and find Will's car in the parking lot. It's a two-hour drive to Wolf Trap. The time goes by with Hannibal sitting patiently in the passenger's seat. He doesn't fidget or make idle small talk. They listen to classical music on the radio, and when Will focuses on the road and can't see Hannibal clearly in his peripheral vision, he imagines him dressed down in Levi's and a wrinkled shirt. He imagines his feet bare and exposed like they were in the Great Falls Park of his imagination. After they've driven for a while, Will says they should go there someday.

It's a risky thing to say, hinting at a someday so far in the unforeseeable future like that. It's exciting, and it's terrifying, and Hannibal could reject him and hurt him so easily. But Hannibal smiles and says yes, they should. Maybe they would take Abigail, too, if she wanted to go along.

And this, of course, sparks a conversation that they probably should have had by now. Will doesn't shy away from it. In a rare twist of events, he sort of wants to talk about the future, about what's in store beyond tonight.

"Is that something we'll be able to do?"

"What are you asking, Will?" Will can't tell this time if Hannibal really does need to ask or not. His confusion sounds genuine enough. Will gnaws at his lip and turns off at an exit. He doesn't want to be going seventy on the freeway when Hannibal tells him what they have won't last for this reason or the other. He pulls over into a residential area and parks the car along the sidewalk.

"I mean, this feels…it's different, isn't it?" His stomach is whirling inside him, warm and unbearable and wild.

"Different in what respect?" He doesn't know what Will's talking about. His heart sinks.

"Forget I said anything." He drops his eyes huffs a self-deprecating laugh. He shakily attempts to turn the key in the ignition. Hannibal stops him with his hand on Will's thigh just

above his knee. It's familiar; it's where he first felt Hannibal through the haze of Fontaine Preston's influence. His leg tenses and then relaxes. He sighs and leans his elbow on the door of the car.

"Tell me what you are feeling, Will." Will closes his eyes and thinks about it.

He shuts out everything. He focuses on Hannibal's fingers firm on his leg, focuses on the slow pulsing beat of his endless calm. He thinks about it. When he finds the answer, he has to swallow down his fear and force the words out.

"I feel like we've started something permanent." He manages, his voice small. The sounds of cars on the interstate crash over the silent car like conjured waves from a sea shell, like leaves rustling in the wind. He waits. Hannibal's hand squeezes once on his leg.

"So you feel it, too."

The tension in Will's frame ebbs out of him like a broken fever. He leans back in his seat and breathes. For a moment, he thought he'd ruined everything, sabotaged his one shot to be happy with another person.

They sit in perfect quiet for Will doesn't know how long before Hannibal offers to drive the rest of the way to Wolf Trap. Will acquiesces and lets Hannibal take the wheel. He brings the car back onto the freeway, and neither of them breaks the silence filled in with the low hum of sonorous music. The DJ croons momentarily about Bach's Passacaglia and Fugue in C minor before introducing Schubert's Death and the Maiden. The lyrics are sung in German.

Will listens with his face turned toward the window so he can watch the buildings and the sky as they drive passed when his eyes occasionally slip open. It's sunny out, and the sky is a pale blue interrupted with nonthreatening rain clouds. The road is slick like they only just missed the rain. The scenery becomes more familiar as he begins to doze. Hannibal wakes him when they are pulled up the drive to Will's house.

Before he can protest, Hannibal takes his suitcase from the trunk and carries it to the porch. He waits for Will to unlock the door and pull it open, anticipating that the dogs will rush out to greet him. He holds the door open wide so they run out into the yard. They're well-behaved even when they're excited, which Will holds as a godsend because he doesn't know what he would do if they jumped up on Hannibal.

He lets them sniff him and then waves Hannibal to the door. The dogs are more than happy to roam the yard on their own. When they're both inside, Will stretches his arms out. His shoulders and a few odds and ends in his back pop, and Hannibal gives him an analytical once-over.

"Are you tense from the flight, Will?"

"I'm tense about everything, doctor." Will takes the suitcase from Hannibal, and Hannibal follows him to his room where he sets it down on the floor by the closet.

“What if I could help you with that?” Will’s heartbeat doubles instantaneously. The last time he said those words, it was guided meditation.

“Great Falls Park?”

“A massage.” His heart stutters in his chest. He walks into the bed so it catches the backs of his knees. Hannibal nears, taking off his jacket and draping it on the edge of the bed beside Will. His shoulder brushes against Will’s chest when he does this. Will sits down. “Would you prefer to lie flat or sit as you are?”

“I should sit.” Will says more to himself than to Hannibal. If he lies down it would be too easy to get lost in the sensation of Hannibal’s hands touching him.

“Very well.” Hannibal takes off his shoes. Will doesn’t ask, but he watches, curious. Hannibal rounds the bed and steps both knees onto the mattress. He makes his way behind Will and has his hands on Will’s shoulders before Will can balk and change his mind. His touch is warm and firm, but there is no intimacy in the way his thumbs dig into his shoulder blades. It doesn’t change the outcome. Will groans and sinks into it. He rolls his head back and inadvertently makes eye contact with Hannibal where he looms above him. His eyes are soft. Will sits straight again, afraid of what he might do if Hannibal keeps looking at him like that.

Hannibal’s hands work deep into his muscles. They travel slowly down the center of Will’s back, kneading with precision and efficiency. Little sounds of happiness slip out of Will’s mouth. At first they are whispers of moans and halted groans, but they take on semblances of syntax and before too long, it is all jumbled, uninhibited extolment. Hannibal is so close behind him. He can feel his body heat and hear the soft exhales that leave his lips when he pushes his fingers into Will’s back.

“Your hands, Hannibal. God, you’re...” He says as Hannibal bears down on a particularly troublesome knot in his shoulder. “*Ah,* I love—”

And Hannibal’s lips are at his throat kissing him, and he can’t breathe because his hands are still working the tired muscles in his back. It’s excellent. It’s perfect. Hannibal’s perfect. He can’t help it that it tumbles out of his mouth as easily as would a swear or an exhale. He says it again and again: “You’re perfect.”

They’re kissing then, and Hannibal’s hands have found their way around Will’s middle so he can hold Will close to his front. His knees frame Will’s hips, and he can’t remember if Hannibal started out there or if he moved little by little. It feels reckless, but it feels intentional, too.

Either way it’s heaven. Their mouths open to each other, and their tongues graze. Hannibal’s breath fills his lungs sweet and warm; the smell of him is comfortable and fresh, and Will wants him. The hand holding to his stomach shifts lower to flick open the button on his pants. Hannibal’s other hand has found Will’s left nipple through his shirt. He can’t concentrate on what Hannibal’s right hand is doing until he feels fingers sliding along his dick and bringing him out of his pants. Hannibal closes his hand into a tight fist around him, and Will’s back arches unintentionally, pushing his body away from Hannibal’s chest but forcing the crown of his head into Hannibal’s collar bone. Hannibal groans into his ear.

Somewhere in between taking him into his hand and pumping a few times, Hannibal has twisted his body around Will's. He slips off the bed and in between Will's knees in one fluid movement. His lips close around Will, and Will fights his orgasm tooth and nail just to watch Hannibal for a few seconds longer. His eyes are fierce and primal, hungry. Will's head snaps forward into his chest, and he clutches at the sides of Hannibal's head. His blunt nails scratch against Hannibal's scalp when he comes, and he comes hard enough that he shouts with it.

His body is a burnt out fuse. The blood burns still in his veins, and he can't get his body to listen to the commands his brain is attempting to issue. He blinks a few times before he realizes his eyes are open, and he's staring not at the white hot screen of his peaked pleasure but at the ceiling of his home in Wolf Trap, Virginia. He feels Hannibal tucking him back into his pants and faintly hears the metallic slide of the zipper over the blood rushing in his ears.

Hannibal crawls up beside him where Will has fallen back onto the bed and leaves a light kiss on Will's lips. Will catches the back of his head with an unsteady hand and brings Hannibal back in. He licks into his mouth and tastes himself on Hannibal's lips, on his tongue, on the roof of his mouth. He sighs when Hannibal pulls away.

"Do you want…?" Will asks as Hannibal stands from the bed.

"It can wait." It is not an unkind taunt or a mocking insult; it is an order. It can wait, and it will. Will is somewhat thankful as he doesn't know how useful he would be in an activity that requires fine motor skills. He feels pretty limber, though; maybe from the massage but probably from the gelatinous state of every bone and muscle in his body after that orgasm. He's positive Hannibal could do something fun with his current elasticity, but he merely sits on the edge of the bed and fits his shoes back on his feet. An immeasurable amount of time passes before Will pushes to sit up behind him and lay his forehead on Hannibal's shoulder.

"I think you need to drive to Baltimore."

"I would be happy to." Will hears the smile in his voice, and he smiles, too.

They arrive at Port Haven Psychiatric Facility at 2:45. Alana said three o' clock, so they go ahead and sign in at the front desk. They find Abigail writing in a journal in her room. The breeze coming in through the opened window smells of fresh earth and bread from the bakery down the street. Abigail keeps a clean room, as always. It's only been personalized on the surface.

She closes the hard cover diary when they enter the room and sits up from where she has been lying on her stomach. Her smile is small.

"Hello, Abigail." Hannibal bows his head.

"Hi." She sets the little book aside without making an effort to hide it or the fact that she was writing in it. She catches Will looking. "Dr. Bloom says it'll help, writing out my thoughts every day." The way she says it, he can tell she disagrees; can tell she knows too much about her thoughts already for putting them to paper to make any kind of difference in the way she feels about them. The scarf around her neck is fuchsia. It's striking against her fair skin and blue eyes.

“Expressive therapy; a classic psychiatric tool.” Will meanders over to the window and looks out through the pale blue curtains. It rained more here than it did in Wolf Trap. The deep green leaves on the walnut tree outside Abigail’s window are plump from the moisture in the air.

“Is Dr. Bloom still coming today?” Will looks at Abigail and can’t tell if she’s asking because she wants them to leave or because she doesn’t want to see Alana. Neither scenario really makes Will feel less uncomfortable. He gravitates back to where Hannibal is standing and puts their shoulders together.

“She will be here shortly. She invited us along.”

“Oh, okay.” She nods. “You won’t get in trouble for being here then.”

“Decidedly not.” Hannibal smiles, and Will allows himself to relax. He looks away when he catches himself staring, which throws his gaze subsequently to Abigail. Her head is tilted to one side, and she’s watching them with an unreadable expression on her face.

“Are you guys…?”

A knock comes at the door, and Alana enters the room. She’s carrying a basket with her.

“You’re here already; good.” She sets the basket on the bed and nods when Abigail gives her a questioning look. She takes off the lid and peers inside. “It’s been a particularly rough week for all of us, so I thought we’d have an easy day today.”

Abigail pulls out a glass jar of pumpkin seeds. Her eyes widen just slightly, and a soft laugh escapes her.

“I love pumpkin seeds.”

“I thought you might.” Alana smiles secretively at her and hands Abigail her coat from the coat stand by the door. Abigail works her arms into it and picks up the basket before she’s even buttoned up. She carries it out of the room and down the stairs, presumably to the garden.

“Has she had a rough week?” Will asks, stepping around Hannibal’s side to face her.

“Well, the nightmares haven’t been getting any better. If anything, they’re worse. The only interaction she has all day is with clinicians and other patients in group.” She turns to go out the door. “Some normality here and there might do a little in the way of helping her.” She looks over her shoulder at Hannibal who only touches Will’s arm in response to his wondering expression.

“How’d you know about the pumpkin seeds?” Will asks when they’ve descended the stairs and Alana is pulling the door to the garden open. They stop a few steps out and watch Abigail unrolling the thin red blanket tucked into the basket. There’s a bench right beside the blanket, probably to accommodate the adults who would rather not sit on the ground. Will

does not plan to be one of those adults. The grass looks much dryer than the tree did. It doesn't leave water on Will's shoe when he scuffs it against the ground.

"Her family kept a pumpkin patch years ago when they lived in Colorado. I extrapolated." She shrugs. "Her father hunted; I figured her mother might have been the one cultivating it."

"Excellent work." Hannibal praises her, and Alana smiles. Abigail tentatively waves them over. She looks much younger picking out pumpkin seeds from the jar and cracking them with her teeth. She reminds Will of himself when he was a boy eating pistachios with his father on the Gulf Coast and throwing the shells as far as they could into the water. They would do it at sunset, and Will could never squint far enough passed the sunrays to see where his landed, but his father always assured him they went on and on farther than his own did.

"Let's go." Alana leads the way. Will walks beside Hannibal and is surprised beyond his words when Hannibal kneels and sits on the blanket across from Abigail. Alana smiles and takes the bench, leaving the last corner of the blanket next to Hannibal for Will. He lets Abigail shake a few pumpkin seeds into his palm and pops a few into his mouth. Abigail watches him crack a few in his mouth and eat the seeds before plucking the husks from his mouth and dropping them in an ashtray Alana packed.

"How in the world did you do that?"

Will laughs at her question, watches Hannibal removing a square container from the picnic basket out of the corner of his eye. He takes a few more from her and holds one between his thumb and forefinger.

"You make a clean break about a quarter of the way through, here or here, so it doesn't crunch." He closes his fingers around the seeds in his hand and points. Her eyes follow him. "If you do it right, the two halves don't separate, and you can tell the difference between them and the seeds. Then you move 'em over to one side of your mouth and put the seeds on the other."

Abigail tries it with a handful that's a little bit too big for a first attempt, but Will matches her. He plucks the white husks from his mouth again and bites back his laugh when she spits a whole seed bitten in two into her hand.

"It takes practice, like anything else." He says significantly, though he feels a little bit silly making a life lesson out of pumpkin seeds. There's a light in her eyes like she wants to laugh at him but can't because half the seeds are still in her mouth. He laughs for her and takes another handful of seeds.

"Where'd you learn to do it?" She says when the seeds are consumed and the husks, as well as bits of the green seeds, are discarded into the ashtray. Will copies her action and sits back.

"My father and I did this sort of thing."

"You had picnics?" She's leaning on one hand, and her bright eyes are watching him attentively.

“Well, not like this, but something similar.” He scrubs his hand over the stubble growing at his cheek. “We used to go to the beaches and throw the shells into the water when we were done.”

“Litter bug.” Alana teases him over the bottle of water she’s drinking. He grins.

“Was this when you lived in Mississippi or in Louisiana?” Hannibal asks, bringing a fork with a kiwi slice to his lips.

“In Mississippi. Um, at the Gulf Coast in Biloxi.” Will clarifies, dragging his eyes away from Hannibal’s mouth. Abigail pokes around the opened fruit container with her fork and spears a purple grape. She hands Will a fork, and he goes for a piece of watermelon.

“Did you prepare all this?” He asks, turning to look at Alana where she’s sitting atop the bench looking like royalty in her deep red blazer and matching skirt. The water bottle looks a bit like a scepter in her hands.

“I did.” She nods. “I had some time after I got home and threw it together.”

“It’s delicious.” She smiles, extending her hand to offer Will a bottle of water. Hannibal intercepts the bottle and hands it off to Will like a baton. Their fingers brush, and Will’s neck grows warm. He has another bite of the watermelon, a chunk of pineapple, and a strawberry. He has room left over, even after the sandwich from the airport, but he has tonight’s dinner in mind and doesn’t want to spoil his appetite.

He talks Abigail through another handful of pumpkin seeds, and it goes no better than the first time. He manages to make her laugh, quite accidentally, halfway through her endeavor, and she has to turn and spit them all into the metal ashtray. If Hannibal and Alana are offended, they make no show of it. They have been carrying on their own conversation all the while Will and Abigail have been busying themselves with the food.

They’ve been sitting for about twenty minutes when Abigail fastens the lid back onto the glass jar of pumpkin seeds. She stands to her feet and takes the ashtray filled with their pumpkin seeds to a trash can positioned around the side of the building and then takes a brief detour inside. The ashtray has been rinsed clean when she returns. Will is glad Alana didn’t fuss over Abigail walking off with what could be construed as a deadly weapon. The outing has been going much too pleasantly to sour it with senseless precautions. Abigail crouches to place the ashtray back in the basket with the pumpkin seeds and then straightens out again.

“I’m just gonna stretch my legs for a minute, Dr. Bloom.” Alana smiles to give her permission. Hannibal rouses to his feet also, ever elegant and lithe in his movements. The blanket doesn’t even bunch up around his feet when he stands, Will notes with envy.

“I will go with you.” Abigail smiles and waits for Hannibal to join her at her side before she spins on her heels to face the strategically planted rows of trees that create a canopy above the brick-lined trail they walk together. Hannibal looks every bit like a father to Abigail; she looks every bit like a daughter to him.

Alana is watching him watch the two of them go. Her eyes are kind when Will returns her gaze nervously before looking down at his lap. She places the capped water bottle on the bench and rises to sit with Will on the blanket. She sits on her knees, and she still looks queenly. Her brilliant eyes and her porcelain skin are so like Abigail's she could be her mother; the mother to a princess walking with a knightly Hannibal beneath the trees.

"So, Will." *Here we go.*

"So, Dr. Bloom."

"Oh, come on." She laughs, patting his arm gently with her hand. Will chuckles, too. He's having a good time, better than he'd hoped he would.

"You want to ask about Hannibal."

"It seems like the safer of two topics I want to ask you about." She says carefully. Her eyes are still kind; no judgment, no pity, and no suspicion. She's concerned for him, and that's as deep as it goes. He sighs.

"You can ask me about the other one if you want." He looks back up at Hannibal and Abigail. They are stopped far off under the trees, and Will can barely make out the expressions on their faces. Hannibal's is a mask at this distance; Abigail, he can see, is smiling widely and nodding her head. He wants to know what Hannibal said to her.

"Are you all right?"

"Is that your only question?"

"It's the only one I'm going to ask you right now." She says easily. "It's a good day. I don't want to spoil it."

"Thank you for your consideration," He says without feeling. He means it, he does; it's just that she's being careful with him, and it makes him feel more like a patient than like a friend. He pushes the thought from his mind. She's just being heedful; she's just being thoughtful. It's not the same thing as treating him like he's cracked glass about to shatter and hurl itself into a million broken pieces. "I mean, thanks." He says again with more conviction, bringing his eyes to her forehead. She smiles.

"You didn't answer my question." Her voice is soft and playful, though it holds weight to it. She is still worried.

"I feel a little better than all right at times." He murmurs wistfully, watching Abigail reach up for a branch about a foot too tall for her to reach. She jumps up and skims the leaves with her fingers. Hannibal looks up and seems to understand her train of thought. He reaches his arm up and twists his wrist to one side. The hand comes down and produces a shiny red apple. Abigail takes it.

"I think Hannibal's good for you." He looks at Alana. "I didn't think so at first, but he's stable." She nods, solemn but approving. He goes to take a drink of his water, relieved that

she doesn't intend to give him a talk about ethics or the birds and the bees. Something in her eyes changes. "And you look cute on his arm."

Will chokes on his water. He glares at her even as her smile widens. She pats him on the arm again. A moment passes, and Will can sense the shift in the air when she makes up her mind to speak the words she has been holding back.

"You would tell someone if you weren't, right?" Will examines a fallen walnut seed. The green protective sheath has expanded around one end. Upon his second inspection, he notices that the inside of the walnut has been hollowed out, probably by a mouse or a squirrel. He looks up at the walnut tree by Abigail's window.

"Yeah." He mumbles, flicking the empty shell into the grass.

Abigail is tossing the apple up into the air and catching it on their way back from the trees. Hannibal has folded his jacket over one arm. He looks dapper and fatherly. Abigail looks lovely, happy.

"I really do mean it, Will." Alana says quietly, standing to her feet. Will stands with her. "You'll be good together."

"I think so, too." He hears himself say.

Chapter End Notes

The article Zeller and Price are talking about:
Nieminen, Marko, Pekka Nuorteva, and Esa Tulisalo. "The Effect Of Metals On The Mortality Of Parnassius Apollo Larvae (Lepidoptera: Papilionidae)." Journal Of Insect Conservation 5.1 (2001): 1-7. Environment Complete. Web. 2 June 2013.

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Shout out to KatoS who bookmarked this story and put muthafuggin' Polish tags on it. Przetłumaczyłem je, i jesteś tak słodka. Dziękuję, dziękuję!

Easy Ride

Chapter Summary

Hanny and Will have dinner, and other things happen.

Chapter Notes

The mask that you wore, my fingers would explore/Costume of control, excitement soon unfolds/And I know it will be easy ride, yeah/Joy, fought vaguely with your pride, with your pride/Like polished stone, like polished stone I see your eyes/Like burnin' glass, like burnin' glass hear you smile/Smile, babe

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hannibal drives them from the psychiatric facility to an organic supermarket. They walk together down the clean, orderly aisles, Will carrying the basket and Hannibal filling it as they go with assorted vegetables and seasonings. They're standing near the cherry bin when Hannibal asks him if he's ever had a strawberries and greens salad. Will grew up in the south, so the answer's a pretty obvious yes.

"Are you partial to them?" Will shrugs. The basket is starting to feel heavy in his hand. He suspects he looks funny holding it at his side like a weight that's too heavy to lift any higher. Hannibal's back is straight as he leans in to inspect a package of deep red strawberries.

"When my aunt made them; she always used asparagus." He smiles at the memory of his father's bubbly elder sister. Her fingers always smelled like strawberries from picking them all day in the fields that were her husband's livelihood. She would bring them home in great bowls and eat them with Will on their front porch in the fall. That was ages ago when he was young, before she and his father cut ties when Will was a teenager.

Hannibal is watching him when his mind clears of the memory. He blinks and feels tears in his eyes.

"Um, sorry, what?" He looks off to the side and studies the fresh loaves of bread across from the produce section until he's righted himself. Hannibal places the strawberries in the basket and doesn't say a word. Will follows him to the rows of vegetables in shiny wet compartments where they've been sprayed with artificial rain.

Hannibal picks a few stalks of asparagus, and a warm pang of something like affection reverberates in Will's chest. His mouth isn't exactly smiling, but Hannibal knows what he's

feeling when he looks upon his face and puts the asparagus into the basket. He picks out some broccoli and a hand packaged bag of baby greens. They walk together to check out, and a pretty redhead rings them up. She's quick and nice, and she says hello to Hannibal like she knows him.

"Have they made you manager yet, Rose of Sharon?" She grins.

"I'd have to make Assistant Manager first, and I'm not even in the running." She gives him his receipt after he pays. Will takes a stocked paper bag in each arm and waits for Hannibal to tuck his wallet into his pocket.

"I suspect you will be soon."

"Thank you, Sir." She blushes and tells them to have a good day. Will must look confused when they get back to the car because Hannibal explains how he has frequented this market for two years. Rose of Sharon spoke to him on his last visit in. She was always polite and efficient with his groceries. It surprises Will that Hannibal speaks to people outside of law enforcement about mundane things. It shouldn't, really, but it does.

"I've never seen anyone with eyes that green before." Will sets the bags down gently in the back seat when Hannibal opens the door for him.

"Beautiful, aren't they?" Hannibal says, managing to sound objective yet reverent at the same time. "Quite rare to see naturally."

They ride back to Hannibal's house, finally, at five o' clock. Will unpacks the groceries on the counter while Hannibal carries his suitcase up the stairs. Will chokes on his own spit thinking about Hannibal's bedroom. He folds the paper bags and sets them neatly on the far counter should Hannibal want to reuse them. He is rewarded for his thoughtfulness when Hannibal joins him in the kitchen and sees them. He places them into a drawer and smiles at Will, a silent *thank you* in his eyes.

He shed his jacket and coat upstairs and offers to take Will's. Will takes care of it himself and finds Hannibal has disappeared when he returns. He shuffles awkwardly in the lonely kitchen and washes his hands. He looks at the items Hannibal's purchased. There's some goat cheese for the salad and a lot more vegetables than Will knows what he would do with in one night.

He hears a door on the other side of the kitchen and goes to investigate. Hannibal comes in carrying two large cuts of frozen meat wrapped securely in plastic. "I had hoped to prepare prime rib au jus for tonight, but it will take too long to thaw, unfortunately. Will steaks suffice?" Will laughs.

"Yeah, that's fine." *Corn dogs would suffice.*

Hannibal gets a large glass bowl and fills it with cold water. He dunks the two steaks and glances at his watch for the time.

"Would you care for anything to drink, Will?" He brings Will a tall glass of ice water when Will nods yes. Hannibal sets one for himself down on the counter top.

“While we wait on the steaks, we will prepare dessert.”

Will collects the items Hannibal names from the fridge and spice rack and carries them around the side of the kitchen island to sit on one of the stools. Will contemplates the ingredients and thinks Hannibal might be making pie.

“Angel cake garnished with a strawberry rhubarb sauce.” Hannibal announces at Will’s curious expression. Hannibal picks an egg from the bowl Will filled and cracks it against the lip of a glass measuring cup. He separates the egg whites into the glass and preheats the oven to three hundred and fifty. He sifts the cake flour Will brought to the counter and then measures it. Will sits at the kitchen island and drums his fingers on the counter top, watching clouds of white flour reach up to dust across Hannibal’s forearms. It reaches no higher than where his sleeves are rolled up just beneath his elbows. Will doesn’t know how the hell he does it, but he’s sure Hannibal can control the will and direction of the fine powder.

Hannibal adds sugar to the flour and pours the egg whites into a separate bowl to beat them. He adds salt and cream of tartar and whisks until the concoction is frothy and white. His hands aren’t even dirty from the eggs, Will notices, when he combines the egg whites with the flour and works a spatula through the batter for a time. He scrapes the mixture into a pan and slides it into the preheated oven like clockwork. He sets the timer for forty five minutes. Will is stunned into a silence watching Hannibal work.

He thought Hannibal was in his element most in his office during psychotherapy. He was totally wrong. Hannibal glides gracefully and effortlessly throughout the kitchen like a bird in the air. He supplies Will with a strainer, he thinks, to make him feel useful. True to form, he hops to his feet and washes the strawberries, asparagus, and broccoli in the low shiny sink. It figures; even the sink is spotless.

When he sets the fruit and vegetables on the counter, Hannibal is re-entering the room from the hallway he disappeared to earlier with a bucket and a bottle of dark wine. He places the wine in the bucket and fills the surrounding area with water and ice. He sets the bucket on a far end of the counter where it will not interfere with his cooking space. He takes up a cutting board from above the sink and a long knife from the wooden block fully stocked of five other knives of various sizes. Hannibal changes the water thawing the steaks and begins with the strawberries.

Will sits himself back into the stool across the island from Hannibal and watches him core and slice the ripened fruit. The ruddy juice spills over onto Hannibal’s long fingers. Bits of red spot the knuckles of his first two fingers like pulp, and Hannibal takes the first one into his mouth. He looks up at Will through his lashes, damn him, and says, “Would you like to taste, Will?”

He can’t say no; he doesn’t want to. He leans over the counter to meet Hannibal’s fingers at the halfway point over the kitchen island where his hand is extended. He closes his lips around the first knuckle of Hannibal’s middle finger, eyes firmly on Hannibal’s pale burgundy tie. It stands out above the deep green vest like a rose in a thorn bush, like a ladybug or a drop of blood on a blade of grass.

His skin is sweet and smells of hand soap and berries. Emboldened, he moves his lips to the tip of Hannibal's finger and sucks it into his mouth. The juice flecks on the corner of Will's lips. He ignores it to lap at the sweet red juice staining Hannibal's skin bright red.

Hannibal's eyes are dark when he dares to look up. He shivers, and his mouth falls open. He breathes against the knuckle hovering against his upper lip for a count of three before Hannibal removes his hand. The pad of his finger presses down on Will's bottom lip as he withdraws. Will swallows around the breath caught in his throat. Hannibal looks dangerous and undecided. His sense of propriety is battling with his desire; Will can feel it rippling through the not-so unbroken calm. He trembles with it. Hannibal tears his gaze away from Will, causing him to realize that Will had not been the one to drop his eyes first.

Hannibal carries on with the strawberries. He measures a half cup of the sliced strawberries and steps back to wash and dry his hands before handling the rhubarb. He chops it and combines it in a saucepan with sugar and the measured strawberries. He leaves it on medium heat and checks his watch again before changing the water defrosting the steaks.

Hannibal washes the cutting board and dries it with a clean towel, explaining over his shoulder that cutting boards made from bamboo need to be oiled after use to keep from cracking. He says bamboo is stronger than steel.

"Only the best." Will observes, drinking his water. He notices as he's taking the cooled glass away from his lips that he followed Hannibal in the action. It unnerves and excites him because it's okay here, even if he lets go on accident. Maybe it should be harder to let go, but it isn't. It's terribly, horribly easy. It feels wonderful. "Do you need anything?" He asks, more because Hannibal is staring at him with an intensity Will cannot hope to match. "What's next?"

"Braised broccoli rabe." Hannibal answers easily. His tone is light and automatically changes the way Will perceives the pondering expression on his face. "There is chicken stock and olive oil in that cupboard." Hannibal points and Will goes. Hannibal steps back to stir the strawberry rhubarb sauce in the pan once before he shuts off the fire. He stirs in a small amount of vanilla extract and more of the sliced strawberries and sets the pan on the back burner to cool.

Hannibal slides another pan onto the stovetop and procures an onion and two cloves of garlic from the heap of unpacked groceries. He minces the onion and drops the pieces into the pan to sauté them with the cloves of garlic. Will feels nervous in the absence of Hannibal's words; feels provoked by the loaded silence, like Hannibal is prompting him to speak by not speaking himself. Even as Will convinces himself that Hannibal is trying to get him to strike up a conversation, he has to remind himself that it's easier than he thinks it is. It's okay here; it's okay to drop his fear and his doubt. Hannibal is adding the broccoli when Will musters up the courage to speak. It isn't courage, though; it's not apathy or carelessness so much as it is pure abandon. It's reckless, and it feels like fire.

"What were you and Abigail talking about, if I can ask?" Of course he can ask. There's nothing stopping him.

“We talked about you.” Hannibal pours the cooled red sauce into a ceramic bowl as the onions and garlic simmer with the broccoli in the pan. The sound is like the rattle at the end of a snake’s tail.

“So it’s true,” Hannibal turns to look at Will. He grins cheekily. “The world does revolve around me.”

“The world, like our galaxy, consists of many smaller worlds that comprise a whole.” Hannibal teases, not the slightest bit thrown. “The worlds of your dogs, for instance, do revolve around you.” He turns back to the fire and adds chicken stock to the pan. The steaming liquids hiss and then quiet down to a low grumble.

“Okay, Aristotle.”

“I prefer Socrates.” Hannibal looks at him, and Will can see the amusement dancing in his eyes from several feet away. He’s looking at Hannibal, looking into his eyes, and he’s not looking away. Hannibal seems distracted momentarily. There’s a minute shift somewhere in his face, though the playful expression doesn’t change. His eyes carry that soft look, that look Will saw that maybe he wasn’t supposed to see when Hannibal touched him in his room in Virginia; it’s a peek into something tender and infinitely precious within Hannibal. Will’s overcome by a surprising urge to tear it apart with his bare hands and taste the individual atoms that made it. He wants to do it, and knowing what that would do to Hannibal somehow doesn’t make him want it any less.

He almost wants it more. It’s confusing, and it’s gone before Will can do anything to act on it. He shakes with the shiver that passes through him. It carries off the haze weighing down in his mind and bearing into the vertebrae that support his skull. He blinks, and Hannibal’s eyes are only playful again. A small smile pulls at his full mouth. Will wants to kiss him.

“Abigail sensed a change in you.” Hannibal muses, switching off the fire. He removes the angel cake from the oven, and the warm smell of the pastry is in instant combat with the pungent garlic and onion cooked together on the stove. Hannibal flips the cake onto the cleared counter and finally brings his attention to the stalks of asparagus.

“What sort of change?” *The bounce in my step, maybe.*

“She said you looked happy, where most days she saw you before you looked haunted.” He snaps off the bottoms and peels the thicker stalks before arranging them on a baking sheet. He works quickly to coat them with balsamic vinegar and olive oil before setting them to brown in the oven. Hannibal refrigerates the cake once it’s cooled and removes the asparagus from the oven. He changes the water in the bowl with the steaks. It won’t be long now.

“The steaks will be ready for the grill in thirty minutes.” Hannibal says as he checks his watch and transfers the asparagus from the baking sheet to a plate. He pulls the wine bottle out of the ice bucket and pops the cork. Will wonders what year it is. It’s probably perfectly aged and from the finest vineyard in Sicily or Alsace. Hannibal enunciates when he announces the name of the wine: “Val di Suga Brunello di Montalcino from Tuscany.” He clinks their glasses together, and Will smiles when he tastes the fermented Sangiovese grape on his tongue. Hannibal’s eyes are bright and wrinkled at the edges.

“You partake of his blood, of Jove’s.” Hannibal slinks into the stool beside Will finally, finally, after bustling about like a line cook in a jammed kitchen without once sitting down. He rests his right hand behind Will’s back on the stool, barely touching him. The light graze of his thumb against the very edge of Will’s shirt is a livewire shocking straight down his spine. The action is leisurely, not meant to imply or instigate anything. Will forces down his impulsive desire to crawl into Hannibal’s lap, even as something wedged even deeper within him cries out at the restraint.

“Jove, like Jupiter?” Will asks after another long pull of wine when he can breathe again, though Hannibal’s thumb shifts back and forth lightly.

“The first name man gave to the Sangiovese grape was blood of Jove, king of the gods and of the sky and thunder.”

“So drinking this is like, what; like we’re taking communion?” Hannibal sips his wine.

“The wine constitutes only half of the Christian practice,” Hannibal begins. “You would need to consume the body as well.”

“Whose?” Will smiles, playing along.

“Jupiter would be appeased by animal sacrifices.”

“Will the steaks appease him?” Hannibal’s eyes shine with unfettered amusement. Will thinks he might be entertained by the extended metaphor Will is enabling. Hannibal smiles, and it lights up his face beautifully in the cool, vast kitchen. The sunset falling in through the window gives the room a warm vivacity that bleeds into Hannibal and makes his strong features blur around the edges where Will feels intoxicated if he looks too long.

“They are neither lamb nor oxen.” Will doesn’t ask what they are. He doesn’t care.

Hannibal stands to his feet and refills Will’s wine glass. He tops off his own and re-sheaths the wine in the ice bucket.

“You don’t have to get me drunk again, you know.” He sips from the wine anyway. Hannibal just smiles his small, secretive smile and takes up his glass.

“Join me outside, Will.” They go together out the back door. The air outside is crisp and fresh, and the trees and grass smell of lush wilderness and rainfall. Will falls into a wooden chair at an eight-seat table and alternates breathing in his wine and breathing in the outdoors. After a while, the aroma of the wine is so ingrained in his nose that the scent of the breeze is tinged with its sweet bouquet like a flourish. Will’s smiles with his face upturned to look at the sky. It’s huge and pure and rounded in the space overhead like an opened parachute. At the very edges of the horizon where the sun hangs a ways over the last bits of earth that Will can see, the sky is tinted a darker cornflower blue.

Will turns when he hears the door click softly shut behind him. The grill is smoking at the foot of the deck behind Hannibal’s house. It rises, pale gray, through the thick branches of the trees in the neighboring backyard. Hannibal has one tree in his yard; a matured oak a few

paces out from a sturdily made tool shed. Both the tree and the shed are neatly manicured and artfully maintained. They bear no gnarled roots or splintered edges.

They're reflections of Hannibal just like Will's dogs are a reflection of him; they reflect patience and order and authority. Will watches the smoke rise and rise. It unfurls into the sky, disrupting the view of the sun. It's something of a relief; it was too bright for Will. Curious, he stands and goes to look for Hannibal in the house. He's marinated the rinsed steaks in a large platter with melted butter. It smells of garlic. He sets it aside after a time and busies himself with removing the strawberries and baby greens from the fridge.

"Would you like to make your plate, Will?" Hannibal removes the braised broccoli rabe from where it was keeping warm in the oven. Will shovels baby greens onto a third of the plate and tops the bountiful mound with a handful of sliced strawberries, the goat cheese, and two stalks of cooled asparagus. He piles a small portion of the broccoli rabe onto the plate, leaving room enough for the steak. He sprinkles some of the balsamic vinegar on his salad.

"I'll make yours, too, if you want." Hannibal nods graciously. Will gets to work. Hannibal leaves the steaks marinating to take down the necessary utensils and a replenished ice bucket with the chilled wine tucked safely inside. Hannibal returns as Will is finishing with his plate and takes them both outside. Will carries the platter out behind him.

"How do you like your steak, Will?" He sets the plates down and lets Will carry the steaks to the grill.

"Medium rare." The smoke flares up when Hannibal tosses the steaks down with an inborn accuracy. Will sets the heavy plate down on the side of the grill.

"I will be just a moment. You may begin without me."

Will doesn't. Instead, he turns in his seat and watches Hannibal grill the steaks under the teal backdrop of the fading sunset. He resembles an augur, poised over the smoke as it lashes out and leaves a thick wooden smell in the air. It's a matter of minutes before Hannibal is bringing the cooked steaks back, and he looks pleased to see that Will hasn't taken the bait to start ahead of him.

"If you keep that up, eventually, I'm not gonna pass."

"Excuse me?" Hannibal sits beside Will where his glass has been perched all along. Will chews and swallows his mouthful of baby greens and goat cheese before daring to speak.

"These subtle tests you set up for me," Will explains, drinking his wine so he won't have to say the words right away. "I'll mess up eventually, and I'll let you down."

"You have not let me down so far." Hannibal assures him, giving nothing away in his eyes or in his voice. "I have never met anyone like you."

"An eidetiker?" Will snorts the word as if it were pejorative. "An empath?" This word is not any better. It leaves a bad taste in his mouth that he counteracts with the thick garlic taste of the steak. Paired with the braised broccoli it's a sonnet in culinary form. He thinks to tell

Hannibal that, but he doesn't want to change the subject; it would be cowardly. Hannibal deserves better than that; Hannibal deserves bravery and composure and sophistication. He deserves someone like himself.

"I will not acknowledge or deny that you are either of those things; it is not my wish to offend you."

"You haven't." Will says, without the inserted pause to indicate an unsaid *yet*. Hannibal has been misleading, indirect, and manipulative, but he has not offended Will. He has only ever proven, repeatedly, that he will treat him as an equal; whether he's the most valuable person Jack has at a crime scene or whether he's naked in a morgue drenched in his own urine after experiencing a very violent, very public seizure.

Hannibal cuts a piece of steak with his knife and the patio light flicks on. The sun sets over the treetops. The sky is a bright navy. Will counts four stars in the sky.

He takes another bite of greens and a thinly sliced strawberry. Every time the sweet flavor of the fruit trickles onto Will's tongue he thinks of Hannibal's finger in his mouth. Every time he thinks of Hannibal's finger in his mouth, he thinks of other better things Hannibal could do with his fingers and Will's mouth. He has to concentrate hard on chewing his food so he doesn't make embarrassing noises.

"What did you tell Abigail?" He asks out of nowhere when he can breathe again. Hannibal sips his wine. Cicadas hum in the trees unseen.

"I told her the truth."

"Which is?"

Hannibal turns and leans in unexpectedly. Will's fork clatters onto his plate. He's halfway through his steak. A few pieces of broccoli remain. Their lips touch, and Hannibal's lips carry the sweetness of the wine and strawberries and the balsamic vinegar. Hannibal bites Will's lip, and Will groans, low, before grabbing Hannibal by the back of his neck and pulling him in closer. He tastes like the steak, and he smells like smoke; he feels like fire.

Will feels a fire of his own creation burning inside of him. It mixes with Hannibal's where their tongues clash in their mouths. It is at first savage and vicious: the two fires within them finding each other and destroying any and all substances separating them. It becomes soft and explorative while retaining its heat and intensity: the flames conjoining and intermingling until no boundary, metaphysical or mathematical, could be drawn between. They are two heads, four arms, four legs, and one soul. They share in the flames; they exist in a whirlwind of barely contained energy that generates between them as easily as friction.

Will understands. Hannibal pulls away just enough to watch Will's eyes with his own. They stare at each other, breathing evenly and nosing and holding on. Hannibal felt, it; he feels it, too. He kisses Will once more on the lips, gently.

"You're much too composed not to have something dark hidden underneath." Will recites to himself carefully, his lips moving against Hannibal's. He kisses them twice in succession.

“But it’s not darkness.” Will kisses him. “It’s fire.”

“It is in you as well.”

“Is it mine or yours?” Will asks with genuine curiosity.

“Does it feel like it comes from me?” Will considers his reply while Hannibal presses their lips together. He realizes Hannibal is giving him time to choose his words. Their tongues dance together, and Will needs to pull away before he loses his train of thought.

“It felt like I brought mine to you, and you matched it.” He whispers.

“Because they are the same, Will?”

“Because you saw what mine was, and you willingly matched it.” Will pulls away from the comfortable, inebriating cloud of Hannibal’s space and breathes in the clean air. “Even unleashed, what you have is controlled; it’s…*restrained*.” The thought pains him for some deep internal reason he can’t fathom. Hannibal takes a bite of his steak, swallows, and drinks his wine.

“You have your forts, Will.”

“And you have the Iron Curtain?”

“Finish your steak, Will.” He does, reluctantly. He has finished the last of his broccoli and polished off the steak before Hannibal speaks again. “I had a very traumatic childhood.” It’s all he says before clearing the plates from the table and excusing himself. Will swears under his breath as he watches Hannibal go. His blood feels cold in his veins thinking about what could’ve happened to Hannibal that he wouldn’t say more about it. He recalls asking about Hannibal’s mother once when Jack had him working the Lost Boys case. He was an orphan from a young age.

Will swears again and fills Hannibal’s glass before filling his own. His head is rested in his hands when Hannibal returns with two small plates of the chilled angel cake. He garnished the pieces with the strawberry rhubarb sauce and a dollop of vanilla bean ice cream on the side. Will stares at it warily before bringing worried eyes to Hannibal’s face. He has a tender look in his eyes, merciful. He takes the beautiful little pastry from Hannibal like the olive branch that it is, and they eat in companionable silence. The full moon has climbed high in the deep indigo sky. Hannibal stands and steps inside to shut off the light.

The moon is bright enough that it illuminates the sky and their plates before them. Will can see Hannibal in the dark, savoring the strawberry rhubarb sauce and the way it pairs with the delicate angel cake. He can see when Hannibal turns his head slightly to look at Will and watch him eat.

He doesn’t want to fall back into a Hannibal-induced stupor before he’s finished his dessert, so he leans back and studies the moon. Will feels right looking at it; he feels assembled and whole. He uses his left hand to eat so he can reach out and touch Hannibal with the other. His eyes are on the sky, counting the stars that haven’t been conquered by the ribbons of

iridescent light emanating from the moon. His fingers are at Hannibal's side; they probe distractedly at his ribs through the two layers of clothing separating his flesh from Will's flesh. Will takes another bite of the cake; the strawberry and the rhubarb overwhelm his senses; he remembers Hannibal's skin under his tongue.

He licks his lips dazedly, and his hands tracks lower. It slides smoothly across Hannibal's vest, lingers questioningly over Hannibal's navel. Will can't see him in his peripheral vision. The moon is too bright to allow anything outside of his direct line of vision to slip through. He feels Hannibal press into Will's hand, and Will takes it as the signal of permission that it is. His hand wanders lower into Hannibal's lap.

His own breathing is speeding up. He closes his eyes when he finds Hannibal through his pants and presses down. He hears Hannibal's deep inhale. The moonlight has stained the blacks of Will's eyelids with circular jolts of colorless electricity. He remembers something he read once in college about circles.

He thinks it was Plato who said the perfect circle can't be looked upon, that it can never be truly experienced. The ring that creates it will never run in a perfect curve; there will always be uneven grooves at the smallest points. It can never be witnessed by human eyes. Hannibal doesn't move beside Will. He can't hear him over the murmur of cicadas. The bulge in his pants stiffens when he squeezes, and Will sighs. His eyes fall open. His cake is consumed. Hannibal is on the final bite. Will has enough patience about him to wait for Hannibal to set the fork back on his plate before he lurches forward and lays siege on Hannibal's mouth. The masticated cake is lost between their mouths, between the taste of rhubarb and the taste of strawberries on Hannibal's lips.

Hannibal moans, a tiny sound in the illuminated night. There's nothing stopping them.

Will climbs into Hannibal's lap, determined. The chair, thank Jove, supports them both. Will recaptures Hannibal's mouth with his own, and Hannibal's tongue is smooth and warm against his. Rather than a fire this time, Hannibal's kiss is an oasis. Hannibal slides his palms up Will's thighs and holds him firmly in place. Will fists his hands in Hannibal's hair and purposely ruins it with his fingers. The hold of the gel fell some time ago, so it gives into him immediately. He pulls too hard in a few places. He can tell by the way Hannibal bites down into his lip and growls.

Caught up in his reverie, Will accidentally bites Hannibal's tongue. His hands find Will's hips and hold fast, hard enough to bruise. Will shivers and groans into the kiss. He remembers biting Hannibal the last time he grabbed him like that; he remembers drawing blood and taking it into himself. He took Hannibal's blood and his body.

Will nips again at Hannibal's tongue, curious and hungry for positive reinforcement. He closes his eyes at the moan it conjures out of Hannibal's beautiful, swollen lips. He bites again, a little bit harder, and Hannibal grinds his hips up into Will's and pulls him down so their bodies crush together. Will rakes his fingers over Hannibal's scalp.

Their mouths disconnect, and Will is hard. He's hard, and he wants everything Hannibal promised him; wants it now.

“Give it to me.” He pants into Hannibal’s neck. He holds onto Hannibal’s shoulders and draws his tongue across the healing punctures in Hannibal’s skin. Hannibal moves one hand behind Will’s neck, a question and a warning. “Give me all of it, Hannibal. Don’t hold back. God, just—” Hannibal’s nails dig into the scruff of Will’s neck and pull him back. He feels like an animal in Hannibal’s lap. He feels like a misbehaving cub submitting to an elder, like a desired mate submitting to a creature of the same rare species.

He expects—violence, maybe; he’s not sure. He doesn’t expect Hannibal to lean in slowly and delicately and kiss Will on the lips. His grip is firm on Will’s neck; he could hurt him, but he doesn’t. He wouldn’t, or maybe he just doesn’t see the point. Will has submitted to him; Will is letting him.

His mouth migrates to Will’s ear. He murmurs, “We are equals, Will.”

The statement drives a long, tortured moan out of Will as if Hannibal had put his hands on him and not just spoken three simple words and his name. His fingers fumble at Hannibal’s vest buttons. Hannibal doesn’t release Will from his grip or stop him from parting the vest and running desperate fingers up his chest to the tie knotted at his throat. He lets Will undo the tie and tug it out from beneath the pressed collar. Will loops it around his knuckles and drops the coiled strip of fabric into his vacated seat.

“We’re exactly the same.” Hannibal whispers against Will’s hair. Will loosens the top two buttons of Hannibal’s shirt and licks at the exposed flesh. He slides his hand inside and runs his fingers along a clavicle and a trapezius muscle. He squeezes Hannibal’s bare shoulder; it’s a tease and a taste of what’s to come. Will breathes down the opening in Hannibal’s shirt and shifts his hips once so their groins press together. The warmth that sparks in his belly is more the result of Hannibal’s stuttered breath than it is from the sensation, though Hannibal’s body pressed against his feels succulent and magnificent.

The fire has started in him again; he didn’t feel it creeping up on him. It’s started in Hannibal, too. He can feel it in the rushed fluttering of his breath at Will’s pulse. The fires twist and spit between their bodies, *inside* of their bodies, and Will sways with it. He frantically undoes two more buttons on Hannibal’s shirt to press kiss after kiss into the flesh that pulsates with his heartbeat. Will stays there breathing in the rhythm of blood coursing through Hannibal’s veins and the impatient thrumming of his own blood in his ears.

“Exactly the same.” Will tests the words in his mouth. They taste like Jove’s blood and a sacrifice. He squeezes his healed hand into a fist, whimpers at the memory of a blade biting into his flesh; of transformative union with the stag; of Hannibal’s needle sewing him back together. Hannibal’s blunt fingernails biting into the nape of his neck morph for a split second into antlers. *“I wondered where you were. I want everything you can give me.”*

“It’s you.” He breathes, stunned and entranced and bewildered. There’s no way to tell if Hannibal knows what the hell he’s rambling about, but something in him changes as he’s searching Will’s wondering eyes. He looks happy, happy.

Hannibal’s fingers leave Will’s neck, and the cool tingle that follows its absence is almost unbearable. Will starts to slide off of Hannibal when he moves to stand, but Hannibal holds

him tighter to his chest. He lifts Will like he is, and Will's legs clamp around Hannibal's waist for fear of falling. It's a silly thing to worry about when Hannibal's hands are on him.

They leave the dirtied dishes and Hannibal's tie, and Hannibal carries him into the darkened house. He sets Will down when they come to the stairs so that Will has to shuffle backwards to escape Hannibal's pursuit of him. He wants to give in to Hannibal on the steps; he wants to lie back and let Hannibal descend upon him and take the very last thing Will can offer to him. He wants to be fucked cruelly and painfully and cry in a mélange of agony and pleasure while Hannibal pounds into him unrelentingly. He's horrified of how wonderful and unexpected the mental image is. He turns and runs up the stairs, fraught with panic and eagerness.

Before he can even pick a room to duck into, Hannibal's hands find Will's shoulders and shove him into a wall so his cheek is pressed into it and Hannibal's front is curved around his back. Will groans and presses back against Hannibal where he can get the leverage to do so. He's an animal, and that's all. He thought Hannibal was an animal, too, but he's the hunter holding the trap. He touches Will, kisses him, and Will wants to scream his joy at having been caught. He doesn't know why it feels so good.

He tastes ash and blood in his mouth. He's afraid now, but not of the stag. He knows he should be this time, but he is only afraid of himself. He's afraid of his curiosity and of his desire to belong here with the stag. He doesn't know what he must do to earn his place here with such a monster.

"We are equals, Will. We're exactly the same."

The stag is Hannibal, and Will is the same as Hannibal; they're exactly the same.

It's almost like when it killed Will, it was doing it to bring out something dormant within him: the thing residing beneath the skin and the rules, beneath the empathy—or perhaps within *the empathy.*

"Because you could be more."

"What can I do?" Will rambles nonsensically just trying to get Hannibal to release and free and unleash him. "I want to. What can I do?" Hannibal flips him around and forces their bodies together. Will wraps arm and leg around Hannibal and stumbles after Hannibal into one of the bedrooms. It's dark like the rest of the house, but the moonlight is bright where it streaks in through the window. Hannibal undresses Will, leaving wet kisses on every patch of newly uncovered skin as he goes. Will is a shaking, writhing mess when Hannibal's stripped him naked. He is still fully clothed, though he looks ravaged. His hair is ruffled, and his shirt is halfway opened. He slips out of his unbuttoned vest, and the sinuous shrug of his shoulders knocks Will's knees out from beneath him.

He brings shaky hands to push the sleeves of Hannibal's shirt down his shoulders while Hannibal slowly takes care of the last buttons holding it together in a horrid veil across Hannibal's stomach. It drops to the floor, and Will snakes his arms around the bare skin of Hannibal's back. He mouths gracelessly at Hannibal's abdomen and presses his fingers into the smooth, hot flesh Hannibal has gifted him with.

Hannibal's hands meet beneath Will's chin to unbuckle his belt, and Will groans. He leans back, clutching the blanket in his fingers, knowing his fingers will do nothing but hinder the process of disrobing the beautiful man towering over him. He steps out of his pants, and Will watches, transfixed, as Hannibal bends down and takes Will's trembling hands in his strong ones. He fits Will's hands to Hannibal's hips and guides them down a few inches so the last article of clothing falls away. Hannibal steps onto the bed, and Will scrambles backward to accommodate Hannibal with enough space. He presses their bodies together slowly, and Will arches into it. His scalp digs into the blankets covering Hannibal's bed when he leans back to look up at Hannibal.

He is reaching for something. Will knows what it is. He stretches his arms high overhead and hangs onto the edge of the mattress in anticipation. Hannibal's fingers are warm and patient opening him up. His body intuitively relaxes at Hannibal's prying digits. He takes one, and the second comes quickly after. He pulls himself up unintentionally and receives a sharp bite on his hip bone. Hannibal keeps his forearm barred across Will's stomach after that. It's too soon when he adds his third finger, but Will doesn't even care; doesn't even want the extra help adjusting to Hannibal once he's inside him. He wants every ache and stab of pain. He wants it; wants it all.

"Hannibal, please." Will grits out. His fingers still hurt inside him, but he begins shoving himself down on Hannibal's hand anyway. He's waited long enough. It's time to collect. Hannibal handles something in the dark. Will doesn't look beyond his chest. He can't look, or he'll come undone.

Hannibal crawls up the length of Will's body, burning kisses into his hot flesh as he ascends. Will bends his knees so Hannibal is boxed in.

"You are not virtuous, Will." Hannibal muses against Will's lips where he's pressing soft but urgent kisses. His breathing is labored and erotic, and Will wants to drown in the sound. Hannibal pushes at Will's hip with one intentional hand, but Will holds onto Hannibal's forearm and shakes his head. The irritated look that graces Hannibal's face is almost hilarious, but Will can't find it in him to laugh. He barely has cognizance enough to say: "Like this."

Hannibal's answering smile is breathtaking, or it would be if Will had breath in his lungs left to speak of. He's been reduced to gasps and grunts. Their lips press together and Hannibal presses against Will's opening.

It occurs to him as Hannibal pushes into him that Hannibal was calling him impatient. There's not enough free space in the usable parts of his brain to react with any kind of intelligent response, so he lets his body overwhelm and rule him. Hannibal nudges in slowly, rocking his hips so he lodges deeper inside of Will at every press before withdrawing just a bit. It creates an incredible tugging in Will's guts. He feels like he'll explode or melt or fly apart into a million unrecoverable pieces. Hannibal doesn't let him do any of those things. His hips meet with the backs of Will's thighs, and he leans down to nuzzle at Will's collar bone while Will adjusts to the fullness, to the sharp, white hot pinch he feels in the small of his back.

Hannibal weaves his arms beneath Will's back so he arches off the bed and so Hannibal's body adheres to Will's, and they freeze like that and breathe around each other's bodies. Will blinks away the sweat trying to drip into his eye and tears his hands away from the edge of the mattress to hold onto Hannibal's back instead. Hannibal doesn't ask if Will is ready; he just takes the reciprocating touch as permission.

He pulls his hips back all the way and snaps forward, and Will yells, squeezing his knees together around Hannibal's hips. Hannibal reaches back with one arm to fit Will's leg around his waist. Will weakly winds his other leg the same way. Hannibal plants his freed hand on the bed beside Will's shoulder and pulls back again. Will clenches involuntarily, anticipating the rough assault that's to come. He feels the full breath that shoots out of Hannibal's lips. It's a harsh sound. Will helplessly tightens around him, and Hannibal groans loudly, ducking down so the crown of his head is pressed into Will's chest. He snaps his hips forward, and Will's shout is softer than it was the first time.

There are no pauses anymore. They are picking up speed, and Will has taken to clenching around Hannibal at every slap of his hips against Will's ass. Hannibal growls into his neck and bites his shoulder.

Will's thighs squeeze around Hannibal's waist as he tries to guide Hannibal closer and closer with his arms and his calves at Hannibal's back. Hannibal switches his right arm out for his left and places his right hand in Will's hair. His fingers grip tightly at the roots the way he told Will not to in Williamsport. It doesn't feel this good when he does it to himself.

You were made for this.

"I was made for this." Will gasps, holding onto Hannibal tighter as their bodies collide more violently.

You can never go back.

"I can never go back." Hannibal shudders and angles his hips to strike Will's prostate head on. "I don't want to go back. *God,* Hannibal."

"Look at me, Will." Hannibal commands him; his voice is strangled but guarded. The flames are only held loosely in check. Will can see hellfire and ruin and destruction in Hannibal's eyes. He can see freedom from fear and dominance, frightening dominance, over the lands it has conquered. He strikes Will's prostate one more time, another time, three, four, five more times, and Will is coming. He's coming on his stomach, and Hannibal hasn't touched him, not once.

Hannibal fucks him through the aftershocks and for a short while longer until his hips stall inside of Will. He rolls his hips a few more times against Will before staying buried inside of Will for a long moment that stretches on and on with no complaint from Will. He thinks he might be falling asleep, but sparks dance across his vision when Hannibal finally pulls out of him. His flesh feels singed and raw, even when Hannibal leaves him to retrieve something for the mess on Will's stomach.

They lie together. Will is ensconced in Hannibal's body, in his scent. He knows Hannibal is awake beside him and far more collected in the afterglow than Will is. He can't make his thoughts concentrate on any one focal point.

His body is worn ragged, used up. He thinks of the feeling he had looking at Hannibal in the kitchen, of wanting to rip Hannibal apart to get at the very cells that made him. He wonders, even as his mind is chasing sleep, if that's the way Hannibal feels about him. Hannibal sighs against Will's shoulder, softly. It takes all his willpower to turn his head and look Hannibal in the eye.

He doesn't know what he feels; there's no room inside of him to feel anything apart from his aching muscles and whited out brain. Hannibal presses his forehead to Will's. He feels something churning within him, an emotion trying to be realized. Will only feels warm and secured. Hannibal's arms are doing that; Hannibal's body provides him with shelter.

"I adore you." Hannibal murmurs. He kisses the corner of Will's mouth, and Will licks noncommittally at the full bottom lip presented to him.

"Tell me tomorrow." He manages to say through the fogginess of his thoughts. He squeezes Hannibal's arm feebly, trying to communicate that he isn't brushing him off but that he can't handle strong emotions or complex patterns of thought right now. Hannibal smiles against Will's cheek. Will's eyes have drifted shut, but he can feel it there, warm and open.

"I plan to." He kisses Will's hair, and as he's falling asleep, Will notes that Hannibal is breathing him in again. He thinks he may be checking to see if his scent has changed now that Hannibal has claimed him. Will likes that idea more than he cares to admit. He squeezes the fingers of his left hand around Hannibal's arm again, and Hannibal stretches a little to brush his fingers against the palm of Will's right hand. Their fingers are melding together when Will sinks under. He dreams about picking apples for Abigail that bleed when Will pulls them from their branches. He dreams that she eats them anyway, and the blood trickles down from her smiling mouth.

In his dream, the apples become human hearts. Hannibal is waving his fingers over a lighter, and even when he stills his hand directly above the flame to meet Will's eyes, the fire doesn't burn him. He smiles, and the little metal rectangle crumbles in his hand.

Will eats the hearts with Abigail, and they are both bathed in red blood. It stains the white dress she's wearing. It stains her skin like a disease, and she's laughing. In his dream he's famished, and nothing sates him. The hearts become lungs and livers and tongues and brains. He finds Garrett Jacob Hobbs in his dream, and he kills him with the dagger-turned tine he harvested from the shed antlers of the stag. The weight of it is exact in his hands when he stabs Abigail's false father in every one of his vitals. He ruins the meat. He doesn't care. He drops down to his knees and tears at the man's bowels with his teeth.

"I am on my knees for you."

Will looks down and finds himself eating his own intestines and clutching the bloody knife from his kitchen. Hannibal presses a burning hand to his shoulder and says, *"You are in a fragile state, Will. There are other methods…"*

He jerks awake, and Hannibal's arms are around him. He's whispering. Will can't hear what exactly until he calms down enough to breathe out of his nose.

"You're safe, Will. I have you."

There are tears streaked down Will's face that he doesn't remember crying. Hannibal wipes them away and coos a while longer in Will's ear until he falls back asleep, this time without dreams.

Chapter End Notes

Green Salad w/ Roasted Asparagus and Fresh Strawberries
http://www.stltoday.com/lifestyles/food-and-cooking/green-salad-with-roasted-asparagus-and-fresh-strawberries/article_81dd5af5-a361-5cb5-a3c6-91ac61e2b11e.html

Braised Broccoli Rabe
http://frenchfood.about.com/od/sidedishes/r/braisedrabe.htm

Sirloin Steak w/ Garlic
http://allrecipes.com/Recipe/Sirloin-Steak-with-Garlic-Butter/

Angel Cake
http://www.preparedpantry.com/howtobakeanangelfoodcake.aspx

Strawberry Rhubarb Sauce
http://www.recipetips.com/recipe-cards/t--4056/strawberry-rhubarb-sauce.asp

Val di Suga Brunello di Montalcino 2007
http://www.wine.com/V6/Val-di-Suga-Brunello-di-Mfontalcino-2007/wine/121914/detail.aspx

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Some Business, Folks.
All right, so. First things first. WE BROKE 10K, GUYS! Oh, my fuckness! To each and every single person who's left kudos, commented, subscribed, bookmarked, or posted beautiful things about this fic on Tumblr (you thought I didn't see, but I did ;D), I just love you, okay? *squeezes you all*

Also, I'm thinking about creating a Tumblr account. I'm not sure how often I'd be updating as much of my time is staring at academic journals and writing for hours on end, but I'd want to use it to better connect with you guys and post snippets here and there (HH-related and not).

The can of worms: sequel, trilogy? I think the appropriate etiquette for this kind of thing is I post the completed story and if you guys request a sequel I write one, but I kind of have the ideas in place already. And if I do continue it (two more parts, 13 chapters each, and a series of vignettes from Abigail's POV), I want to start right away and hopefully keep spouting out fic at the same rate that I've been going. I will continue to write stuff if Hyacinth House ends next chapter.

Think about these things and let your voices be heard, beautiful Fannibals of the world! One more chapter to go! Я вас люблю.

I Will Never Be Untrue

Chapter Summary

Hannibal deals with Will's indecision.

Chapter Notes

I will always treat you kind, try to give you peace of mind/Only you tell me that you love me one more time/Now darling, please don't be sad/Don't run off like that when you get mad/'Cause if you do, you gonna lose the best friend that you ever had/That's no lie...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The only interruption in the course of their night together is Will's unfavorable dream. Recovered from that, Will does not disturb him once. Hannibal sleeps all of four hours before giving Will his arms and leg back from where they are entangled in Hannibal's limbs and around his middle. A soft noise falls from Will's lips, and then he's silent. Hannibal watches him sleep until the sky turns a plum color at the very first suggestions of the sunrise.

Hannibal leaves Will sleeping in his bed and takes a shower in the hallway bathroom so as to avoid waking Will from his sleep. He scrubs through his hair and quickly washes his body under the hot water. He wraps a towel around his waist and pads back to his bedroom where Will has turned on his side to sleep in the warm spot left by Hannibal's body in the sheet. His right arm is stretched out so his fingers hang over the side of the mattress. Hannibal kneels at the long edge of the bed and kisses the tip of Will's middle finger to gauge Will's sensitivity. He takes the finger into his mouth the way Will had in the kitchen. He mumbles Hannibal's name but doesn't wake.

He rises and flits soundlessly to the closet for clothes. It's Sunday, and he has no prior appointments to keep. He looks at Will over his shoulder and smiles, mind made up.

The one pair of jeans he has to his name is moderately expensive and tailored from a much younger year in his life. He wore them out on a hunt one night in graduate school, and the results had been favorable. The results will be favorable with Will, too, in case he decides to be disagreeable. He shrugs on a white dress shirt and buttons it up, tucking in the ends in as he leaves the room. Will sleeps on, his face turned into the sheets.

He descends the stairs of the silent, darkened house to collect the dishes from the yard. He makes a second trip to retrieve the half-full bottle of Val di Suga Brunello di Montalcino standing in a bucket of completely melted ice. He splashes the grass with the cold water and

carries the bucket and the bottle separately into the house after pushing in the two chairs he and Will used. He places the bottle back in its place on the shelf in the wine cellar and sets the bucket down beside the freezer where he kept the meat from last night stored, the meat Will had not asked to know about. Hannibal's prepared answer was venison.

He had let Will so close last night; had nearly let him see everything and for a moment, thought Will had. He had debated then, grievously but only for that one moment, snapping Will's neck or wrestling him to the ground to make his murder look like an act of self-defense. By some miracle, Will had not found him. Will had found something in Hannibal, but it wasn't the Chesapeake Ripper, not yet.

He had asked to see everything, and Hannibal had yearned desperately to give it to him. Even as he lowered the preliminary walls held in his mind, he could feel Will holding back just as much as Hannibal was; holding himself back from the truth because it would be too much. He could not bear to look directly at the answer that had to have been glaringly obvious to him by now.

Hannibal will contend with Will when he wakes. He will have to. His easy peace will not hold for much longer. Hannibal only needs it to hold long enough to keep Will from running out the door and escaping him—should he attempt it. Hannibal's survival as a creature of habit counted on his leaving Will to unravel in the dark; conversely, Will's survival, and now his happiness, counts on his ignorance, or his acceptance.

He was, and is, the only one fit to catch Hannibal; he is the most dangerous and the most intoxicating human being alive in Hannibal's carefully constructed universe. He needed Will on his side up until the final moment. When the final moment came, he would destroy Will or Will would destroy himself. Early on, he postulated that Will could be ruined by devices of his own creation, and he was prepared to coax him fully into madness. He was prepared to let Will burn. That was before the prospect of keeping Will for himself became a viable option.

He climbs the stairs when he's finished taking inventory in the freezer to re-enter the kitchen and finds the backdoor open. His mouth curls at one side, and he instinctively takes up a meat tenderizer from one of the drawers nearest to him. He scans the hallway and goes to check upstairs for an intruder when he sees Will is gone from the bed. He heads back down the stairs and looks out the backdoor. He returns the meat tenderizer to the drawer and fetches an overcoat hanging by the front door. He walks out to the oak tree in the backyard where only Will's protruding legs are visible from behind the base of the tree.

His eyes are open, but he is asleep and still in a state of undress. Hannibal crouches down to Will's level and takes his chin in his hand.

"There's blood in the sink." He says with a knit in his brow. "The forks and the plates; they're all bloody."

"You're dreaming, Will."

"No, I saw them." He murmurs, eyes glossing sightlessly over Hannibal's chin. "Blood everywhere."

“We had dinner last night, Will. Do you remember?” He combs his fingers through Will’s hair and watches Will’s eyes drift shut.

“I ate their hearts.” Will mumbles. “Abigail ate them, too, and you were on fire.”

Hannibal lifts Will to his feet and props him against the tree long enough to drape the overcoat over his nude body. Will shivers under Hannibal’s arm and lets Hannibal walk him back into the house and up the stairs. He attempts to take the overcoat from Will’s body, but the man wraps it tightly around himself. Hannibal thinks it’s intentional, though on a subconscious level; Will’s mind needs a physical reminder that something went amiss in his sleep. The overcoat will give him a clue as to what happened. Hannibal leaves him to wear it and steps back into the closet.

Will is nearly as tall Hannibal, so he takes out a simple pair of black slacks that should fit and a black shirt. He folds the clothes and leaves them beneath a towel at the foot of the bed for Will to change into after he’s had a shower. He takes Will’s clothes and shuts the door behind him.

Downstairs, he deposits Will’s clothes in the washing machine before slipping back into the kitchen. He runs the water in the sink to scrub the red strawberry stains off the plates and forks where he had left them to soak. He watches the red chip off into the suds; Will had seen blood when he looked. His dreams were bloody, too, then. Hannibal considers the proper way to ask about them as he dries the dishes and puts them away.

The rest of the kitchen is predominantly in order apart from the few odds and ends that did not get re-shelved in the pantry. Hannibal puts whatever is left back into the cupboards. It’s a quarter to seven when Hannibal scrounges up the necessary ingredients to make crepes. The blender is quiet enough that the sound of it should not travel upstairs and wake Will, but he works with it quickly to mix the flour with two eggs, milk, and water. That finished, he spoons the batter into a bowl and refrigerates it.

Hannibal retires to the library and takes Jung’s *Dreams* down from the shelf. He stands at the foot of a cream-colored armchair and opens the book. His eyes scan the page, but his mind is reviewing the reel of his memory, recalling what he knows about the stag.

Freud, fixated on sexual association, would suggest the beast’s antlers symbolized the penis and that Will’s breaking the tines in his hands symbolized masturbation, but Hannibal knows it has to go deeper than that. The specific image of the stag must go deeper in Will’s mind than that; it must stand for something else with which he initially felt at odds and did not understand but gradually came to accept and even crave the sight of.

He sets the book down on the side table and moseys over to a shelf on the other side of the room where the books on mythology and folklore are kept. His fingers slide along the spines of the worn leather bound books. Finnish pagans of old revered elk as sacred totem animals, second only to the bear. The deer represented life to the Chumash; there was also the Iroquois myth of Sosondowah and the heavenly elk. The stag was something more than sustained life and eternal longing. It was a combination of the two of them and something even greater and more sublime than a creature merely of the earth or merely chased into heaven. He reaches for *Algonquian Legends of the Americas.*

He stands at the bookshelf flipping through the pages for any and all obvious elk symbolism in the names of the beasts on the pages. It is toward the bottom of the Table of Contents: *wendigo*.

"You are more astute than I gave you credit for, Will." He murmurs, turning to the numbered page. The stag is a literal representation, whether Will knows it or not, of a man-turned-wendigo, a creature with varying states of appearance, though commonly depicted with the pelt and antlers of an elk; a creature devolved to its anthropomorphic state from a man following the consumption of human flesh. It is a damned beast unlike the reformable chenoo. It is a cannibal and a monster; it is Hannibal, and it is Will.

He places the book back in its place. He needs nothing else from it.

Returning to the armchair, Hannibal seats himself and reads further about Jung's theory of compensation. Will has dreamed of the stag several times in Hannibal's presence; on occasions when Will spoke, he could easily have been talking to Hannibal or to himself. The animal was not unintelligible; it was aware and purposeful in its interaction with Will. It was the domineering force even in his lucid dreams.

Will knew. He *knows*.

And yet he had eaten with Hannibal still. They had coupled last night. Will allowed Hannibal to hold him through his bad dreams as though he did not perceive Hannibal to be one of them, though his subconscious seems to be at war on that particular matter.

He would need to persuade Will to stay then. Hannibal would do whatever it took to prove to him what he had always set out to prove to him; that he could be so much more if he only opened himself up to the possibilities. Hannibal could open him up. He will if Will's shaky resolve allows even a hairsbreadth of a passage for manipulation to pass through. If there exists within him the smallest chink in the armor guarding Will's heart, in nonphysical terms, Hannibal will find it and transgress it, and Will will let him and thank him for it when he is done.

He checks his watch. He stands and returns Jung to the shelf and makes his way into the kitchen. Rolling up his sleeves as he goes, he melts some butter in a skillet and removes the batter from the refrigerator. The crepes cook quickly, so he transfers them to a plate to keep warm while he gets started on the salted butter caramel.

The butter melts in the heavy cream he pours into the saucepan on the stove, and he moves it out of the way to prepare the sugar in another saucepan. He holds his fingers under the faucet and flicks the water clinging to his skin at the sugar so it dissolves without further stimulation. He shakes the caramelized sugar in the pan and adds the heavy cream and butter mixture from the previous pan. It stays a while longer bubbling over the heat before Hannibal switches it off and stirs in a small amount of sea salt. While the salt is dissolving in the caramel, Hannibal steps aside to make coffee.

He spoons the caramel down the center of each of the crepes and folds them into quarters. He sets the completed, though plain crepes into the oven to keep warm while he finishes the rest of the plates' additions. There is a bit more of the caramel left that he scoops up into a small

glass dish and tucks into the oven beside the crepes. He remembers Will's clothes and leaves the kitchen momentarily to toss them into the dryer.

He soaks the caramel saucepan in water and washes the saucepan with the heavy cream and butter without difficulty. He dries it and uses it to melt more butter over the stove. He peels, cores, and slices apples to go into the butter and measures confectioners' sugar to stir into the pan. He sprinkles brandy over the cooking apples and tips the pan to catch the alcohol on fire. It is a petite flame; it won't take long to burn out. Biding his time until it does, he switches off the stove and takes down a bowl from one of the cabinets and beats heavy cream, sugar, and vanilla extract by hand.

The door upstairs opens and closes, and he switches to a hand mixer. Will emerges into the kitchen, probably woken by the smell of coffee brewing. He leans against the counter of the kitchen island, forearms flat on the black granite. He is wearing the clothes Hannibal laid out for him.

"Good morning, Will."

"Morning." His reply is small like he lost his breath the moment he started to speak. Hannibal looks up at him as he shuts off the whirring hand mixer; he just catches Will looking away. The all-black ensemble makes him look handsomely svelte, how Hannibal envisions a modern-day Death would look. His wet hair is pushed away from his forehead.

"Crepes with salted butter caramel, sautéed apples, and vanilla Chantilly cream." He announces simply as Will watches him.

He unplugs the device and detaches the two creamy whisks. He drops them into the soaking saucepan and removes the warmed plate of cooked crepes. He lifts three of the six crepes onto a plate for Will and keeps the other three for himself. He spoons some of the Chantilly cream beside the crepes on both their plates and allots them each a scoop of the sautéed apples. He pushes the glass dish with caramel towards Will and plants a short spoon into the golden liquid.

"Would you care for coffee, Will?" Will nods and pulls the dish closer to him with his middle and ring fingers. He looks distracted. Hannibal pours two steaming cups and stirs two teaspoons of sugar into Will's. He brings back the coffee and finds Will already eating. A stab of something like disappointment pangs sharply in Hannibal's gut.

"These are good." Will nods vaguely after a few bites. He has devoured the first crepe too quickly to savor it or to bother to taste the pairings with either the apples or the cream. He drizzles more of the caramel over the remaining two crepes with the small spoon as Hannibal sits beside him, and they eat in silence. This is not what he had in mind for their first morning together. He finds himself wishing Will would initiate conflict or get out. This childish impasse is so entirely not what he planned for.

"I was thinking, um, earlier." Will says into his glass before he takes a drink. His voice is low and timid but firm in the thought he is working toward saying. Hannibal notes that Will's hands are shaking.

“What were you thinking?” Hannibal asks gently, only curiosity filtering into his voice. He takes a bit of the cream on the edge of his fork and eats it with the crepe. Will watches him do this before trying it out himself. He swallows that bite and then pairs the crepes with the apples finally, drizzling some more of the caramel on top before tasting it. A part of Will’s face lights up, but something much heavier is still weighing him down.

Will swallows around a breath. He takes another and sets his fork down. He seems to change his mind.

“You live almost an hour away.” He says slowly as if waiting for Hannibal to finish his thought. Hannibal stares at Will uncomprehendingly. He thinks Will might be trying to break up with him and briefly calculates the required force it would take to stab Will with his fork. It wouldn’t take much if the velocity of the strike was just right. He would have to go for a vital area close to the surface of the skin; a vein in his neck or the artery in his leg. “It works now, but we’ll get frustrated just making the trip to see each other pretty soon.” Will looks at Hannibal for the first time since he sat down beside him.

“What do you suggest, Will?” Hannibal brushes his thumb along the handle of his fork, internally chanting to himself that he needs to see this conversation through before stabbing Will on an impulse. It would take more than meaningless words to iron out a wrinkle like that.

Will’s eyes drop, and Hannibal releases his grip on the fork altogether. His mind is racing; some of his thoughts come in his native tongue. Some of his thoughts are just Will’s name on repeat. He thinks his face might be a mask, but he can’t feel it over the cacophony tearing through him. Will reaches for the hand closest to him, Hannibal’s left hand, and closes his fingers over Hannibal’s. The din quiets. He hears Will say, “I thought I’d look into getting an apartment somewhere nearby.”

Hannibal tears his eyes away from their hands, and Will’s eyes are nervous but hopeful, wishing for something; maybe wishing for Hannibal to take the bait and leave the truth behind. The oppressive weight lurks still behind his eyes. Hannibal wants it brought to the surface so he can gnash his teeth against it. It can only be one thing. Will is too afraid to receive confirmation. He has his discovery fastened down deep within himself; he is trying to keep it a secret so Hannibal will not tell him he’s right. Denial is an ugly look for Will. He was created with a rare acuity for truth. His eye for the truth is what Hannibal wants from him; his ability to understand it and to become one with it is what Hannibal wants.

Shying away from that, Will is as ordinary and commonplace as Jack Crawford or any one of the corpses Hannibal has left to rot since his youth. He stands and dumps the contents of his breakfast into the trash: a full crepe and a half with several apple slices and a chunk of Chantilly cream. He’s lost his appetite. Will doesn’t move from where he sits at the counter. Hannibal can’t bear to look at him, so he turns and gets started on the dishes that have accumulated in the sink. The caramel disintegrates under the water, but Hannibal scrubs hard at it anyway, incensed. He has washed and dried all the dishes but for a few spoons and a fork; he is polishing them with a clean dish towel when Will’s voice rings out in the silent room.

“I guess you’d prefer the distance.” Hannibal stills his movements at Will’s tone of voice: sarcastic, cold. “More difficult for me to surprise you that way.” Hannibal sets the dried utensils on the counter.

“Do you think I find you threatening, Will?”

“I am threatening to you; whether you’re threatened, I really couldn’t say.” He hears the stool scrape the tile as Will gets to his feet. “Do you feel anything at all?” Hannibal turns to face Will and finds him standing around the side of the kitchen island. He could rush him. There is nothing congesting the space separating them. The knife block is equidistant in between them where it sits on the counter. Two strides forward are all it would take. Will has his police training, but Hannibal is sure he could move faster than him if he needs to.

Hannibal watches Will’s face for a flicker, for anything, that will tip Hannibal off as to what he plans to do next. What he sees there is indecision and hurt married with incredulity. The ugly mass within him is gone, but Will is still hiding some of his cards from Hannibal. He figures it is a fair enough trade to make as most of what Will feels is traitorously exhibited in his eyes.

They are conflicted and wounded; he thinks what has happened between them was a ruse to thwart his suspicions of Hannibal. He thinks Hannibal made love to him only to disable Will’s professional objectivity. If it were as simple as that, Hannibal would have no reservations about killing Will here in his kitchen; here where they have shared in food, in kisses, and now, in their first spat.

Hannibal does not move from where he is. He doesn’t want Will to think he means to flee or to attack him. To show his ease and the relative state of calm that has returned to his mind, Hannibal slowly fits his hands into his front pockets and watches Will’s eyes dart down once to follow the action. He looks away, seemingly angry at himself for giving into the cheap tease. Hannibal does not smile, though he does think this reveals Will to be less at odds with him than he originally appeared.

“You are a threat to me.” Hannibal nods his head slightly. Will’s eyes harden as he watches Hannibal. “If I trusted you any less than I do, I would feel threatened.” Will’s mouth drops open for a moment before he catches himself and snaps it shut again. He looks away and runs a hand through his drying hair. The curl is more pronounced, more buoyant in its state. It makes Will seem younger and far more innocent than he is.

“You mean if I were any less attached to you, you would feel threatened.” Will spits angrily out the side of his mouth. “If I weren’t—” His jaw clenches; Hannibal watches the muscles working in Will’s cheek.

“What was it that exposed me?” Hannibal asks softly when Will makes no move to finish his thought. He takes a slow step forward. Will takes two in the same direction, backing up until Hannibal has rounded the island and Will is standing in the threshold between the hallway and the kitchen. Hannibal thinks he knows the answer.

“The stag.” Will breathes; the way he says it is almost like he’s addressing Hannibal directly with an official title. “You’re the stag; you’re the Ches…” Will’s breath catches, and he

stumbles back into the dining room. Hannibal follows him. He leaves the knives where they are. He would rather not frighten Will beforehand if he does end up having to kill him. "Damn it, Hannibal." Will backs into a wall, distraught. "Deny it. Tell me I'm wrong, that I'm crazy or dreaming, something." Hannibal continues to advance until he is only a few steps away from being able to reach out and touch Will with his hands.

"Would it really do anything to deny what you know to be true, Will?"

Will closes his eyes, covers them with the heels of his hands. He shakes his head a few times. When he drops them to his sides the tops of his cheeks are wet with smeared tears.

"You…" Will bites his lip. When he releases it, there is a single speck of vital red. "You *bastard.*"

"What are you going to do, Will?" Hannibal cuts their distance in half, traps Will between his body and the wall. His eyes ricochet in between Hannibal's eyes, fearful but daring; wrecked but resilient; betrayed but enlightened. Hannibal watches his blue eyes dim as the lids cascade over them until Will's eyes are almost closed. Hannibal looks closer, thinking Will is about to faint, but then hands are on his shirt, and Will is toppling them both over onto the ground.

Hannibal feels the change before he sees it in Will's eyes, in the way outside elements only scratch the surface of him as he looks on. His hands are stronger than Hannibal remembered them being the night before as Will holds him down. He stares into Hannibal's eyes with something akin to rage. Hannibal's first instinct is to struggle against Will, match his strength with his own and fight him the way Will probably wants him to, but he lies back, and Will's hands gradually let up. He is straddling Hannibal's hips, and his hands are poised on Hannibal's stomach. He is thinking, feeling, and wondering. He is looking at Hannibal, and Hannibal is looking at him, and they are seeing each other.

He feels the exact instant when all the violence of Will's anger dissipates. He takes his hands and holds them against Will's sides, touch gentle, inquisitive. Will's eyes slip shut; his hands are still firm on Hannibal's stomach.

"You asked if I was capable of feeling emotion as if you believed I couldn't." Hannibal whispers. "But here you have taken on my mind, and you feel something. What is it?" Will's nostrils flare once, and he grits his teeth around a sharp inhale.

"I feel a few things." He says slowly. "Some of it's yours; some of it's mine."

"The fire?" Hannibal asks, moving his fingers just so against Will's flanks. Will looks down to watch Hannibal's hands move against his body.

"The fire." Will whispers, taking his hands from Hannibal's stomach to cover the caressing fingers brushing over his eighth and ninth ribs. He squeezes Hannibal's hands, tightly but then only enough to keep their hands connected. "I don't understand you." Will says without inflection.

“Yes, you do.” Hannibal runs his hands further up to the true ribs and around Will’s back. Will holds onto Hannibal’s forearms as they encircle his body. “You always have.”

“I didn’t know you were like this.” Will breathes. His eyes find Hannibal’s again. “What happened to you?” He is truly curious. Even with Hannibal’s influence siphoned and trapped inside of him, Will cannot find a reason that satisfies him.

“I happened.” Will’s hands slide down to Hannibal’s shoulders, causing him to lean forward. The angle casts a shadow over his eyes.

“I guess I do understand.” He says to himself, running one hand along Hannibal’s neck and brushing his thumb along his Adam’s apple. Hannibal remains perfectly still even as Will’s fingers close around his throat and obstruct the airway like he thought they would. Will holds for a slow count of ten before he lets go. The smile on his face is light, playful. His words are slightly less so. “Not nice to be strangled, is it?”

“Will.” Hannibal scolds him, swallowing around the discomfort in his throat. His fingers dig into Will’s back, but Will’s hands are planted on the floor on either side of Hannibal’s head. He cannot be moved that way.

“You’ve been grooming me, haven’t you? That’s what all this has been about.”

“All this?” Will looks down and revises.

“Maybe not all of it.” He licks his lips thoughtfully. “You don’t want to kill me, do you?” It isn’t a plea the way Will says it; it’s a statement disguised as a question.

“I had rather not.” Hannibal says instead of answering purely in the negative.

“What would you have me do then?” Will looks up at Hannibal, eyes wide and undecided. Pieces of himself are beginning to trickle through. Hannibal tightens his hands on Will’s back as Will begins to pull away. Taking advantage of Will’s brief inebriation, he bucks Will off of him and moves to sit on top of Will’s back. Will does not move beneath him except to paw uselessly at the floor. He sighs, and he relinquishes his control to Hannibal. “What do you want from me?” He sounds tired.

“Your respect, Will.” He turns his head so his cheek is pressed into the floor.

“That’s a funny thing to ask for when you’re *sitting* on me.”

“What about this arrangement do you find offensive, Will?” Hannibal asks calmly, ignoring Will’s previous statement. “Do you find me offensive now that you know what I am?”

“I don’t *know* what you are. You’re nothing I’ve ever seen before.” Will attempts to shake Hannibal off only once. Hannibal only has to put his fingers on the back of Will’s neck to convey to him that if he tries it again, the outcome will be unpleasant for him.

“What about this arrangement do you find offensive?” He asks again, enunciating. Will turns his head back into the floor and stays there, refusing to reply. Hannibal’s fingers tighten around the back of his neck. “Answer me.” Will deflates beneath him.

“I don’t.” Hannibal releases his neck. “There’s nothing.” His voice is small like it pains him to have to admit it.

“And this offends you.” Will makes a noise like a whimper.

“It’s *wrong*, what you are—whatever you are. What you do is—”

“Murder elevated to an art form?” Hannibal offers when Will’s breath hitches, and his words fail him. Will bangs his head once on the floor, not hard enough to do damage but hard enough that the dull thump echos through the room. “Self-harm, Will.”

“Right, you’re the only one who’s allowed to hurt me. Sorry.” Hannibal gets to his knees and flips Will beneath him before again holding his body down with his weight and with his hands manacling Will’s wrists against the floor.

“I know what’s best for you, Will.”

“Yeah, no, you have a point. You do.” Will vituperates, sarcasm dripping from his words as they climb in volume. “Because if I don’t do exactly what *you think* I should do, you’ll kill me, is that it?” Hannibal swoops down and captures Will’s lips in a kiss. Will doesn’t respond at first. Hannibal pulls back slightly to look at Will, and his eyes are hooded, cloudy as if with smoke. His breaths are short, excited gasps. He leans in slower and kisses Will again. Will lets him and then bites Hannibal’s lip so the skin breaks and drips blood into Will’s mouth. Hannibal leans back and watches the tiny red gems of his lifeblood spill onto Will’s lips. Will doesn’t move away from it. His lips are parted. The speck of his own blood has been painted over with Hannibal’s. They are bonded.

Hannibal dives down again, and Will meets him as much as he can from his position on the floor. Will moans into the kiss, writhes beneath Hannibal’s body. Their tongues clash in their mouths like two snakes fighting for authority. Will submits to him; of course he does.

“It’s nice down here.” Will mumbles when their lips separate. Hannibal eases back and pulls Will to sit up beneath him. Will still manages to look like a collared animal with Hannibal straddling his lap.

“I prefer us to be on the same level.”

“Because we’re equals.” Will says tonelessly, staring at Hannibal’s shirt. He lifts his hand to bunch his fingers up in the collar of Hannibal’s shirt, marveling, in all likelihood, at the absence of a tie. His lip is stained unevenly with the red from their blood. “Did you mean that?”

“I did, and I do.” Hannibal says, eyes locked onto Will’s. The fog is gone. Will is looking back at him with only a thin veil of doubt coming between Hannibal and Will’s trust. Once he gets his hands on it, it will be nigh impossible for Will to revoke it. He knows Hannibal now, as intimately as it is possible for any one person to know him; there is nothing Hannibal could do to lose it. He only has to ensnare it first.

Will licks his lips, scooting back on the floor. Hannibal allows him to do this. They stand together, and Will wraps his arms around himself and shows Hannibal his back as he takes a few aimless steps toward the foyer, gravitating almost incidentally toward the stairs. Hannibal follows him. He waits at the foot of the staircase as Will plods up about halfway and then comes to a jittering halt with his hand holding tightly to the rail. He sinks down to sit on the step with his back against the wall. Hannibal takes a seat on the bottom step, back leaned gently against the railing. He waits.

“How do you pick them?” Will asks carefully, eyes staring blankly across the room at the far wall.

“People who are rude to others,” Hannibal begins, holding his back straight and his hands in his laps as Will’s eyes drift to his postured form at the bottom of the steps. “There are so many of them.” He rotates through his chest to look at Will. He drops his eyes and then looks back through the railing at the wall.

“Just people who are rude.” Will shrugs his shoulders.

“People who compromise my life.” He says unthreateningly. “Or the lives of those I care about.”

“Have you killed anyone for me?” Will asks lightly, trying desperately to hide how much the answer matters to him. “Or Abigail?” His eyes find Hannibal’s again.

“There has been no need for that.” Hannibal speaks around the deaths of Marissa and the girl mounted on the stag’s head in the field. Abigail and Will were not in any danger when he killed them; they should not be held complicit for the acts.

As for Casson, the person responsible for his death is in the ground. Will does not need to know the specifics.

“But you would.”

“In a heartbeat, Will.” Hannibal answers easily. He has killed for so much less than that, the question is almost insulting. “Just as you killed for Abigail, before she ever meant anything to you.” Will swallows and Hannibal stands. He climbs a few of the steps until their eyes are leveled. Something looks broken deep within Will; the thing that kept Hannibal at arms’ length even when they were as close as was physically possible. It is gone, vanquished. He should have known Abigail was the answer.

He extends his hand to Will, and he takes it. Instead of rising with Hannibal, Will tugs at Hannibal’s hand, a silent request for him to sit. Hannibal does, two steps beneath the step where Will sits; their hands are locked together. A silence stretches between them. It carries a delicious pressure that is suggestive and animal and exists within the transitive relationship between Will’s empathy, his desire for Hannibal, and his fear of being alone, of losing this connection he has that, right or wrong, is as close as he has ever come to truly knowing another person and being known completely in return. Will slinks down to the step in between them. Hannibal looks up into Will’s face and finds the expression there soft, accepting.

Rather than join him on the step, Hannibal turns and winds his arm about Will's waist to bring him into his lap. Will throws his arms around Hannibal's neck and kisses him hungrily. Hannibal kisses him back, and Will bites him through a growl.

"Don't do that. Don't *match* me." Hannibal crushes Will's body against him with his hands splayed across Will's back. "You still can't show me everything." He shakes his head, raking his fingers through Hannibal's hair. Will frantically undoes the fly of Hannibal's pants and slides his hand down to grab at Hannibal's budding erection. Hannibal pinches Will's skin through the shirt where he clutches onto him tightly.

"Show me what you feel right now." Will breathes, fumbling with the pants Hannibal gave him. A flicker of confusion crosses his face before he remembers they are not the cheap slacks he is accustomed to wearing. He surprises Hannibal when he kicks them off and yanks Hannibal's pants and boxer briefs down to his thighs and crawls back into his lap.

"Will, I will not do this to you without a lubricant." Will spits into his hand and pumps Hannibal twice, languid and provocative in his strokes. Hannibal's hands drop to Will's hips.

"You promised you'd show me everything. Do it." Will dares him as Hannibal nudges against his unprepared hole. Will's fingernails bite into the skin on the back of Hannibal's head when he pushes into him. He groans, low and loud, when Hannibal pulls Will to sit fully in his lap. Seconds tick by, and Will presses his forehead roughly against Hannibal's and pants into his mouth at the painful intrusion to his body. Hannibal wraps one arm around Will's shoulders and presses his other hand flat across the small of Will's back. He moves inside of him, a forceful upward twitch of his hips. Will holds onto him. He moans desperately through closed lips.

"You will not run from me." Hannibal snaps his hips up, and Will shudders. "You will not keep yourself from me." Will finally begins to move above Hannibal. He drags Will down by the hips each time he lifts himself up, and each slap of Will's flesh on Hannibal's flesh is punctuated with a sharp cry pulled straight out of Will's diaphragm. Will's flings one arm out to hold onto the railing and continues to scrape his fingers across Hannibal's scalp with his other hand. "You are *mine,* Will Graham." Will shivers as his body tightens up around Hannibal.

"Yours, I'm yours." He mumbles into Hannibal's shoulder. He angles his hips and rewards Will with a tap on his prostate. Will howls into the empty house. His back arches in a beautiful curve so his face is turned toward the ceiling. "Fuck me, use me, own me." Will groans, unaware, maybe, of the words tumbling passed his lips. Hannibal closes his hand around Will's straining penis and drags his hand down once and then back up. Hannibal watches the ejaculate spatter across the black shirt on Will's trembling body. He buckles forward, and Hannibal works himself in and out of Will a few more times before his orgasm rockets through his body, scraping against everything inside him and leaving his body insensate in its wake. The first sensation he feels is heat as his body struggles to come down.

"Hannibal." Will mumbles weakly. Hannibal opens his eyes and tastes blood. He relaxes his jaw and pulls away to see the shiny red lines on Will's flesh where his blood mingled with Hannibal's saliva. He licks his lips; he can feel that the slickness extends down his chin. He looks down and sees that there is blood on his shirt as well.

Will's hands find Hannibal's still crushing his hips, and Hannibal reluctantly releases him. Will sighs, worn ragged but relieved. Hannibal holds Will's cheek in one hand, and Will studies his face.

"What do you do with the organs?" Will asks, staring in between Hannibal's eye brows. Hannibal kisses him. "When you take them, what do you…" Will stops and his breath stutters in his throat. "The steak." Hannibal smiles in spite of himself. Will is still too enshrouded in the endorphins released from his orgasm to react accordingly. "You fed me people."

"It was nothing personal, Will." Hannibal murmurs against his lips.

"Have you done it to Jack?" He sounds slightly more interested, perhaps able to think more rationally about it when the question is not aimed at him.

"Several times." The look on Will's face is appalled. Hannibal shifts his hips, and it falls away immediately, replaced by the overwhelming sensations sparking anew between them.

"So we add…unwitting cannibalism to the list of things that you just do occasionally." Will grits out when he recovers.

"You have never complained." Will swallows down his reply, ignoring Hannibal's probing gaze to focus on Hannibal's chin. He presses his thumb beneath Hannibal's bottom lip and drags it down his chin. He lingers a moment with his thumb on the mental protuberance. Will leans in and laps at the blood surrounding his thumb. His hand migrates to the back of Hannibal's head as he moves lower to reach the few drops that dripped onto his neck. It is Will's blood, so he is not squeamish.

"You're impossible." Will says disbelievingly against Hannibal's pulse, nipping slightly.

"I once thought something similar about you."

"Huh," Will leans back. "Always thought you viewed me as a sure thing."

"Never sure; never a thing." Hannibal kisses Will. Their bodies shift and burn where they are connected. Will winces as he lifts up off of Hannibal and drops gingerly into his lap before shakily moving to sit beside Hannibal on the step.

"So you didn't foresee bloody stair sex in your immediate future when you put these on?" Will gestures at the jeans hanging forsakenly around Hannibal's thighs. He pulls them up unhurriedly and does the zipper.

"Nothing so specific." Hannibal leans back with his elbows on a higher up step. Will turns and leans against the wall again. His bare ankle brushes against Hannibal's. He has been barefoot since he came downstairs.

"What did you do with my clothes?" Will looks down into his lap distastefully and reaches for the pants strewn carelessly a few steps down. Hannibal leans forward and presses a warm kiss along Will's spine. He breathes against the fabric creating a flimsy boundary between Will's body and Hannibal's. Will slowly straightens, the dark slacks clutched in his fingers.

“I ran them through the wash.”

“Are they done yet?”

“We will check.” Hannibal leans in to peel back the shirt where it clings to the bloody wound at Will’s shoulder and tastes his handiwork with his tongue. There is no suck mark in the middle; it hasn’t bruised at all yet. There is only the brilliant scarlet and the faint peach of Will’s skin. “First I should like to see to this.”

“Very kind of you.” Will muses. “Who knew? A cannibal who bites during sex.” Hannibal looks at him.

“You bit me first, Will.” The blush that flashes across Will’s face is lovely, made even more beautiful by the fact that Will does not look away. The corners of his lips twitch a little with a smile he is fighting, only barely. Hannibal surges forward and gently licks the smattering of color across the bridge of Will’s nose. He follows it down to Will’s cheekbone and to his neck and to the exposed collarbone. Hannibal must have ripped the shirt open at some point to get at his shoulder with his teeth. One of the buttons is missing; another is hanging on by a thread. He knew his wardrobe would suffer for his pursuit of Will Graham.

“If you are not as taken with it as I am, I will do my best to refrain in the future.”

“Goes against what I asked of you, doesn’t it?” Will pulls on the pants. Hannibal notes his lack of undergarments. His eyes are distant, pondering. “I did ask you to show me everything.”

“I meant what I said to you before, Will.” Will looks at him, the daze slowly departing from his bright eyes.

“When you said what to me before?” Will prompts. His eyes are open, searching. Hannibal can tell Will is going to stay; can tell he has no intention of running. Though Hannibal is not certain as to why just yet, he can guess.

“That we are equals,” Hannibal says with his eyes on Will. “And I crave your respect.”

“If that’s all, you probably didn’t have to do all of this.” Will looks down and shakes his head minutely.

“Regarding all that has transpired between us, Will, what makes you think I don’t want you in this way?” Will stares down at his lap. He takes a deep breath and loudly releases it.

“The way you think confuses me.”

“What about it?”

“You want this because you’re tired of doing it alone.” Will blurts out, lowering his voice when he continues. “You think you see something different in me, and I don’t know how I’m ever gonna measure up with whatever ideal of me you created inside your head.” Hannibal touches Will’s knee. Will looks up at the ceiling and takes another deep breath. “You’re

trying to mold me into something that…I don't think I can handle becoming." Hannibal takes Will's chin in his hand.

"I only want you to be free, Will." Hannibal murmurs. "Free from the fear that enslaves you and makes you a slave to others." Will's eyes glisten, and he blinks once before taking Hannibal's lips in a kiss.

"I wouldn't be free." Will whispers against Hannibal's chin. "Just on a longer leash."

"Which would you prefer, really?" Hannibal leans back to watch Will's face change with passing fear, denial, and reconsideration. He buries his face in Hannibal's clavicle and does not speak. "You're afraid of what you would do if you let yourself feel with abandon."

"People like me shouldn't feel with abandon." Will pulls away. Hannibal closes his fingers around Will's wrist.

"People like you are the only ones who can feel with abandon." He studies Will's face and can see that though Will hates that he does, he agrees with Hannibal.

They sit together on the steps, halfway in between the landings at the top and bottom of the staircase. Will laces his fingers through Hannibal's and closes his eyes. Will has shown so many sides of himself today. Hannibal will explore them all. They have time and more.

Chapter End Notes

Crepes w/ Salted Butter Caramel
http://frenchfood.about.com/od/crepes/r/saltcaramelcrep.htm

Sautéed Apples
http://frenchfood.about.com/od/desserts/r/sauteedapple.htm

Vanilla Chantilly Cream
http://frenchfood.about.com/od/pastrycream/r/vanchantilly.htm

Line taken from Harris' *The Silence of the Lambs* (slightly paraphrased, obviously): "Nothing happened to me, Officer Starling. I happened."

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I misread the crepes recipe the first time through and wrote a cup of sea salt rather than the 1/16 teaspoon. Imagine my confusion and the eventual hilarity that ensued when I realized my error. "These are some salty crepes. Oh! A cup of *sugar.* Well, that makes more sense."

Also, go here to do the Tumblr thing. I'll post more things when people start hoppin' onboard. > bluesyturtle.tumblr.com

End Notes

Chapter titles and lyrics come from the mystical beings John Densmore, Robby Krieger, Ray Manzarek, and Jim Morrison, otherwise known as The Doors.

Works inspired by this one

[Podfic] Hyacinth House by bluesyturtle by justbreathe

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!